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Yu Shimizu
ILLUSTRATION
Asagi Tosaka
The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

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The
Demon Sword Master
of Excalibur Academy

The School Festival Exhibit
A katana-wielding older-sister type
SAKUYA
A girl from the Sakura Orchid. Her homeland was destroyed by the Voids.
An impish, teasing, maid older-sister type
REGINA
Riselia's maid. Loves poking fun at Leonis.
A kind, motherly older-sister type
ELFINÉ
The eighteenth platoon's operator. Daughter of the family that owns the state-santcioned conglomerate, the Phillet Company.
A cool, if ditzy, older-sister type
RISELIA
Leonis's guardian and minion. A Vampire Queen.

"...M-Miss Selia, you don't have to hold my hand!"
"Let's go to the next store, then. That one over there's really popular!"
The strongest Dark Lord, reincarnated as a ten-year-old.
LEONIS
Has his hands full dealing with his young body and the older girls in his life.

“Feel my
blade’s
wrath...!”

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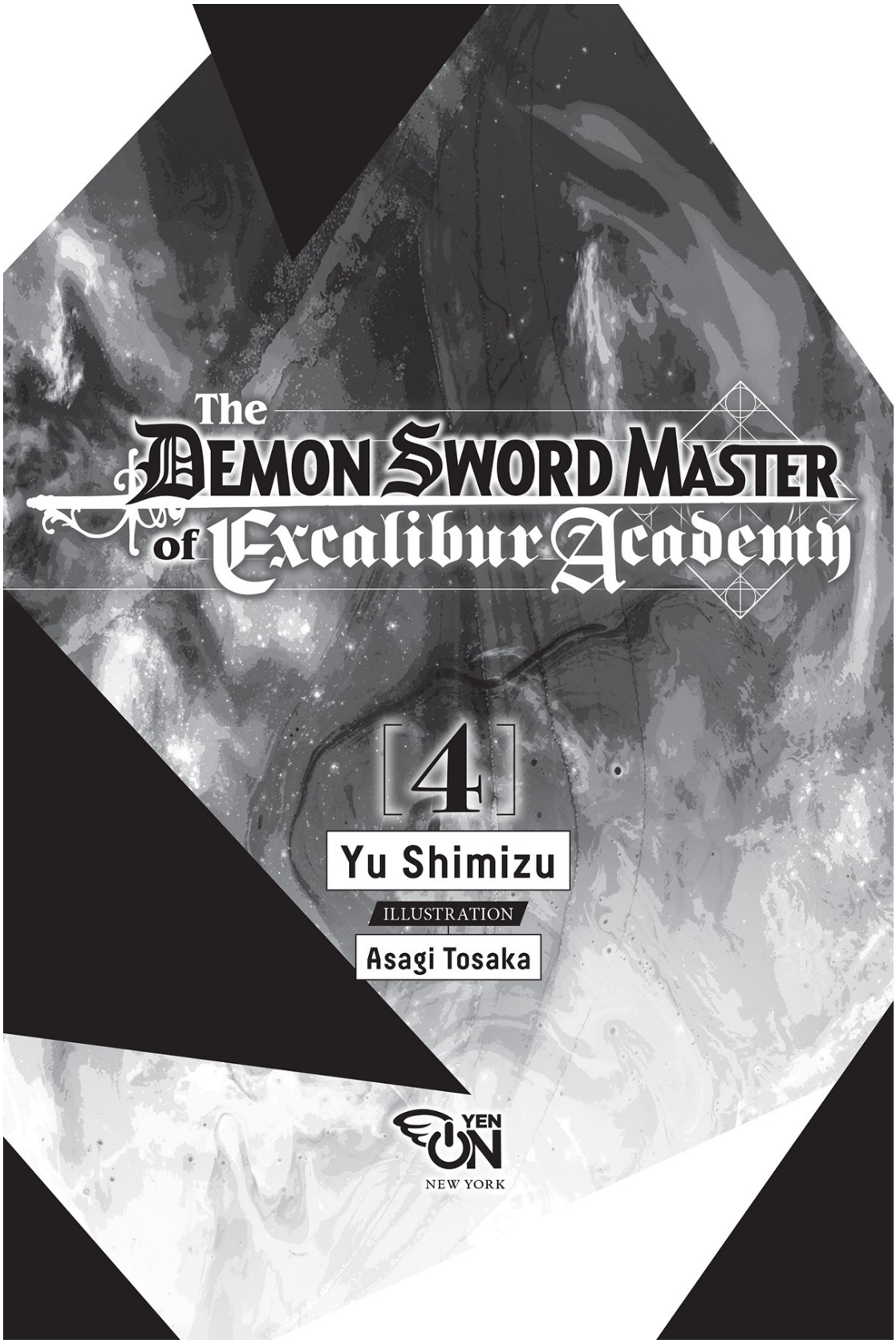
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of Excalibur Academy
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Characters

The Demon Sword Master of Excalibur Academy

Riselia

A girl who became Leonis's minion and, at the same time, his guardian.

Leonis

The Undead King and greatest Dark Lord. Was reborn after a thousand years, but for some reason, he ended up in the form of a ten-year-old boy.

Regina

Riselia's personal maid. Harboring a secret.

Sakuya

A girl from the Sakura Orchid, a place ravaged by the Voids. A master swordswoman.

Elfiné

Operator of Leonis's platoon. Heiress of the Phillet Company.

Shary

An assassin maid. One of Leonis's dark minions. Loves sweets.

Blackas

One of Leonis's dark minions and prince of the Realm of Shadows. Very fluffy.

Tessera

An elf girl who knows Leonis from his Dark Lord days.

PROLOGUE

Scrunch… Scrunch… Scrunch…

As a gelid wind blew by, clouding one's field of vision, the sound of snow being crushed under a set of footsteps could be heard. This was the northernmost tip of the fourth continent—the territory of the old Kingdom of Frosthaven.

This area had once flourished thanks to an industry built on frost-mana leaden metals. However, sixty-four years ago, a Void Stampede erupted in a neighboring territory. Frosthaven was consumed in a matter of two weeks.

No human dared set foot upon that frozen soil since. That changed today, though, as several figures advanced through this desolate tundra.

"Are you sure you're all right, Research Officer Clauvia?" a middle-aged man asked as he looked up at a glacier through a pair of military goggles.

This was a ruin research team captain. He was affiliated with the Sixth Assault Garden's urban defense knights.

"Yes, the advance unit's report says the Void nest that caused the catastrophe here has already been destroyed."

The one who answered was a woman in her twenties, clad in cutting-edge protective clothing meant for low-temperature environments.

Her name was Clauvia Phillet. Daughter of the Phillet Company, a nationwide industry that monopolized the production of Artificial Elementals. Despite her young age of twenty-six, she was a talented woman who had risen to the position of senior researcher in the Sixth Assault Garden's laboratory. What's more, she'd done so on her own accomplishments, not nepotism.

"I just hope that the advance unit didn't accidentally overlook the nest's presence."

The research team advanced through the blizzard, their climbing irons noisily stabbing into the snow. Fluttering all around them was what looked like smoldering butterflies, but they were actually fire Artificial Elementals, tuned by the Phillet Company. The heat emitted by these disposable spirits was the reason the team could survive such an intense storm.

"—C-Captain, I have a visual on it! That's the block of ice we heard about!"

Two of the team members who walked ahead of them signaled their position by waving their mana lanterns. As they approached, they discovered a gigantic crater gouged into the frozen ground. Buried at its center was a mass of ice, forty meils in diameter.

"Duke Crystalia's research was correct after all…"

“Towing it away is going to be a challenge. Is it possible to at least take out what’s inside it?”

“This is a Frost Goal, produced by an ancient power. Our technology can’t destroy it.” Clauvia shook her head, looking up at the mass of frozen water with enraptured eyes. “I’d imagine even a Holy Sword would be insufficient…”

She got the impression the being within the ice was somehow stirring within its prison.

“So this thing once ruled the ancient world?” asked the captain.

“Yes,” Clauvia replied. “This is what they once called a Dark Lord.”

CHAPTER 1
EXCALIBUR ACADEMY'S FESTIVAL

"The warrior Amilas, the grappler Dorug, and the archmage Nefisgal. The proud Three Champions of Rognas. In honor of your distinguished service during this recent campaign, I bestow a Devil Bone Medal upon you three."

"A-a Devil Bone Medal?!"

"How awe-inspiring…!"

"Is that not one of the greatest honors one in the Dark Lords' Armies can receive?!"

The three skeletal knights clattered their remaining teeth in excitement as they wept tears of gratitude.

"You deserve it," Leonis responded with a magnanimous nod. "Your achievements are great. Take pride in yourselves."

They were in Leonis's room, on the second floor of the Hræsvelgr dorm. A little more than three days had passed since the investigation of the Third Assault Garden. Having finally awakened from the fatigue induced by using the Demon Sword Dáinsleif, Leonis elected to reward the three knights for their contribution in battle.

I must establish that while punishment will be severe in the newly reformed Dark Lords' Armies, effort will be generously compensated.

Despite being deep within enemy territory, the three skeletal knights had done a splendid job of guarding his minion, Riselia. They'd demonstrated their vigorous strength during the fight against the Voids as well. Such achievements were more than sufficient to earn them a Devil Bone Medal.

"Hmm. Leo, is that little…bone toy of yours really that big of a deal?" Riselia asked, her ice-blue eyes regarding the badge with doubt.

"Y-you do not know, Lady Riselia?!" Amilas rattled in surprise.

"Why, a Devil Bone Medal is the greatest decoration an undead could hope to earn!" Dorug prattled.

"…It is?" Riselia asked, looking utterly perplexed.

"In that case, I shall receive the medal as the representative of our order!" the robed skeleton, Nefisgal, said as he made to put away the medal.

"Wait just one moment, Old Nefisgal! That will simply not do!"

"The one to hog all the glory should be the one who contributed the most! In other words, it should be me, Hell's Grappler, Dorug!"

"How could you say that? I haven't much life left in my old bones. It would only be fair to relinquish it to me."

“We are undead, Nefisgal. There hasn’t been any life in any of our bones in recent memory! Now, go on, hand it over—”

“Oh, no, no, no, I am most worthy of this reward!”

The trio’s quarrel devolved into a scuffle, and soon the three skeletons were tangled together in a marrowy jumble of fisticuffs.

“…Grr, you three…!” Leonis groaned, holding a finger against his temple in annoyance. “Enough of this. Hold a duel or whichever contest you prefer and decide who shall receive the prize.”

Holding up his Staff of Sealed Sins, Leonis dropped the three lumped-up skeletons into his shadow. The Champions of Rognas kept on wrestling as they sank into the floor.

“…I swear. Their strength as undead is without question, but why must they be so…?” Leonis whispered in exasperation, his shoulders drooping.

Riselia, however, chuckled in a wry manner.

“Wh-what?” he asked.

“Your friends are pretty funny, Leo.”

Feeling a blush creep onto his cheeks, Leonis gave a dry cough. “I have a medal prepared for you as well, Miss Selia.”

“…Huh?”

Leonis brandished his staff, producing a skull the size of one’s hand that levitated in the air.

“L-Leo, what’s this?” Riselia asked.

“An Arch Death Medallion,” Leonis answered with a solemn tone. “Do accept it.”

Had the Three Champions of Rognas still been there, they likely would have raised their voices in shock. This was the highest-caliber award, made from applying golden leaves to a real dragon’s skull. Only the greatest generals of the Dark Lords’ Armies were bequeathed one.

Leonis was confident, however, that Riselia had done enough to earn this trophy. During the battle with Tearis Resurrectia, a member of the Six Heroes who’d been turned into a Void, she’d shared her blood with Leonis when he was injured. This act had saved him in his time of crisis. Plus, her blood had also served to awaken sealed memories regarding the goddess Roselia.

“Now, no need to feel reserved. Take it,” urged Leonis.

“H-hmm…”

The Dark Lord offered Riselia the shining golden dragon skull. However, the young woman shook her head uncomfortably.

“I-I’m fine. I don’t need it! Knowing you’re grateful is enough for me,” she said, patting Leonis gently on the head.

“Y-you don’t need it?” This unexpected response seemingly flustered Leonis. “It’s an Arch Death Medallion, you know!”

“Y-yeah. I mean, you gave me that pretty dress, right?”

“Right…”

Indeed, he'd gifted Riselia the True Ancestor's Dress, an item rare and valuable enough to be referred to as a national treasure. That hadn't been a reward, though. Leonis had always intended to give that to Riselia.

"Then, do you want something else? While not quite a match for the Arch Death Medallion, I could bequeath you a Death Chariot or a Staff of Hell—"

Leonis hurriedly tried to offer her alternatives, and Riselia regarded him with a strained smile. Squatting down, she hugged Leonis's head tightly.

"M-Miss Selia…?"

"Listen, Leo," she whispered into his ear. "The best prize is seeing everyone back safely. And that's all thanks to you."

"Aaah…" Leonis stiffened.

Riselia's fingertips had a coolness to them, a unique vampiric trait, and her silvery locks brushed gently against his neck.

"Now, we should be getting ready for breakfast. Regina's waiting for us."

Riselia got to her feet and sauntered out of the room, her uniform's skirt wavering as she did. Having been left behind, Leonis scratched his flushed cheeks and returned the medallion into his shadow.

Such humility. Any of my other subordinates would have squabbled over this reward. Leonis felt his admiration for Riselia increase, as it often did. Naturally, his minion had no way of knowing that.

◆

With the skeletal knights out of sight, Leonis shifted his room's curtains and opened the window. Leonis wasn't one for bathing in sunlight, but by now, he'd gotten used to it.

Occasionally, he felt a tinge of longing for his stone coffin in the Grand Mausoleum, but when he once tried to sleep in the dark closet, Riselia got angry at him when she came to wake him up. She told him, "You're not a vampire." To which he'd dryly replied that she was, which only served to make her angrier.

Leonis activated the small terminal on his desk, checking the report Shary had brought him. He'd already grown used to using these devices that operated on magical technology. It'd been three days since his team had returned from their investigation on the Third Assault Garden. Of course, calling their excursion something so mundane wasn't nearly enough to sum up all the things that had happened, but that was beside the point.

"No information about that man…," Leonis whispered to himself, sighing internally.

Nefakess Reizaad. One thousand years ago, the slender white-haired man had been a retainer to Azra-Ael, the Devil of the Underworld. It was clear that he'd been involved in the attempt to bring Tearis Resurrectia—the Holy Woman of the Six Heroes who had been turned into a Void—back to life.

Moreover, it was evident he possessed information regarding the goddess Roselia, whom Leonis sought. He'd stated that Roselia was to awaken using the Holy Woman's body as a vessel. And indeed, Leonis had confirmed that the goddess's soul had dwelled within Tearis Resurrectia's body.

However, her soul, much like her vessel, had been defiled and polluted by emptiness.

"I need you to promise me. In the distant future, if I change and become something else… I want you to kill me with that Demon Sword… And then… *Please find the real me.*"

Roselia's words had been locked away in Leonis's mind until recently. Her divine foresight allowed her to foresee the possibility that the power of the Voids might tarnish her soul.

And that's why she split her spirit into several fragments…

Roselia had tasked Leonis with freeing the parts of her soul polluted by the Voids and finding her true form. Right now, the only tangible clue he had was the Devil of the Underworld's retainer.

I must use all the Dark Lords' Armies' resources to seek him out.

Leonis's grip around the Staff of Sealed Sins tightened.

"Don't think you can run from a Dark Lord forever… Heh-heh-heh…" He chuckled menacingly, an evil look in his eyes.

"—ord… Hmm, my lord?"

Feeling a tug on his uniform's sleeve, Leonis looked down, and his brow furrowed. "Mm?"

"I have a report, my lord…"

Beneath him was the upper half of a girl clad in a maid's uniform. Her lower portion was submerged in his shadow on the floor.

"Oh, Shary. Very well," stated Leonis.

"Thank you. Excuse me, my lord…" Shary Corvette Shadow Assassin silently crawled out of the dark. She was a lovely creature with dusk-colored eyes and black hair. The girl was a covert killer and Leonis's servant.

Shary levitated for a moment in front of Leonis before the tips of her shoes clicked on the floor. She greeted her master with a dignified curtsy.

"You mentioned a report. Is it about Nefakess Reizaad?" Leonis questioned.

"No, I haven't discovered anything about him yet. My apologies," replied Shary as she shook her head slowly.

"I see. Then, what is it?"

"It's about the remnants of the Sovereign Wolves group, who joined your ranks recently. Fourteen more of their former members have offered to join your side."

"Oh, so the Demon Wolf Pack continues to grow." Leonis nodded to himself at this development, looking pleased.

The Demon Wolf Pack was a group composed of core members of the Sovereign Wolves group, an organization of anti-imperial demi-human

terrorists. Following the seajacking of the royal family's personal vessel, the *Hyperion*, they lost their leader and were on the verge of collapse. Leonis swooped in to fill the gap left in the wake of their commander's death, integrating them into his own forces.

Initially, there were only thirty or so members of the Demon Wolf Pack, but Leonis had subordinates actively scouting demi-human ruffians who were displeased with the Human Empire. At present, their ranks had swelled to sixty.

Leonis secretly hoped that one day, when he would announce his second coming to this world as the Undead King, this organization would come to form the core of the new Dark Lords' Armies.

"Let them do so. I leave judgment of who to scout up to you."

"May I really make that decision?" Shary confirmed.

"Yes, go ahead."

Shary was likely concerned that mindlessly adding more members to the group might result in problems cropping up at unexpected junctures. Her doubts were reasonable. Unlike the undead who made up the grand majority of Leonis's army one thousand years ago, the Demon Wolf Pack was an assortment of different creatures from various walks of life. While the menace of the Undead King kept them in line, for the time being, that could change as the Demon Wolf Pack continued to grow.

But so be it…, mused Leonis. Leading such a heterogeneous group was a challenge he welcomed. Building the Dark Lords' Armies into a full-fledged force demanded that kind of experience.

"Understood. I will do as such, then—"

Bowing respectfully, Shary began to sink back into Leonis's shadow.

However, Leonis called out to stop her. "Wait, Shary."

"Yes, what is it?"

"I still haven't given you a reward, have I?" he asked.

"…?!" The maid's dusk-colored eyes widened.

During their mission in the ruined city, Shary had been told to escort and guard Regina and the other girls—a task she had completed expertly. She'd also done well protecting Leonis's kingdom's people during the takeover of the *Hyperion*.

These accomplishments more than justified a medal.

"My lord, an award would be wasted on someone like me…," Shary said as she bowed in reverence.

"No need for modesty." Leonis shook his head. "Failure to recognize my minions' accomplishments would tarnish my honor as a Dark Lord."

"I see…"

"Now then, for your prize…"

"Is it doughnuts again?"

"Are doughnuts what you desire?"

“E-erm, anything would make me happy so long as it comes from you, my lord. But if possible, I’d prefer something that lasts longer… M-my apologies!” Shary waved her arms in a flustered manner.

“Hmm. Something more permanent, you say…”

Perhaps a Dragon Mask or a Devil King’s Gauntlet would do? Leonis turned down the idea almost as soon as it occurred to him. Both items were priceless treasures, but Shary was petite, and they wouldn’t suit her.

While Leonis continued to ponder his options, Shary suddenly asked, “Excuse me, but you gave your Vampire Queen minion the True Ancestor’s Dress, correct?”

“Mm? Yes, I thought it might be too soon, but Riselia Crystalia has the potential to serve as my right hand eventually. I’m sure she’ll master using it before long,” Leonis replied.

Shary pouted dejectedly at this. “M-my lord, are you considering making that girl your…b-bride?”

“M-my what?!” Leonis found himself stammering. “What do you mean, *bride*?!”

“The True Ancestor’s Dress is to be worn by a vampire woman who will be wed!” Shary asserted indignantly.

“W-well, that’s a custom unique to vampire culture!” Leonis hurriedly retorted. “I only gave her that outfit to increase her powers.”

“R-really…?” the assassin maid asked wearily.

Leonis nodded, to which Shary let out a relieved sigh, for whatever reason.

“Are you dissatisfied that I gave the dress to such an inexperienced minion?” Leonis inquired.

“No, I don’t intend to question your decisions, my lord.” Shary shook her head with an expressionless face.

The Undead King regarded his attendant pensively. “Hmm. Shary, what is your opinion of Riselia Crystalia?”

“Her skill with a sword is still lacking, but she grows at an astounding rate,” Shary said, remaining stoic. “As a leader, her judgment skills are extraordinary, and I must praise the effort she puts into her duties.”

“I see. It sounds like you’ve been observing her quite closely,” Leonis remarked, his tone betraying approval of Shary’s praise.

“I must be able to discern if she’s suitable enough to serve as your minion,” Shary replied flatly.

Having his favored underling receive such praise pleased Leonis. Suddenly, he recalled he was supposed to be granting Shary a reward, not talking up Riselia. “Right. What say you to a magical ring, then?” he suggested.

“A…ring?” Shary looked up at Leonis, wide-eyed. “I-I’m very happy, but…I’m not sure my heart is ready for this…”

The girl’s cheeks flushed a rosy color as Leonis offered her the band in question. It was a very ominous-looking, skull-shaped thing.

“It’s the Devil’s Ring. A mythology-class artifact I obtained when I defeated Zol-Azura, the Devil of Hades.”

“…”

“Mm? Is something the matter?”

“…No. Thank you kindly, my lord.”

For some reason, Leonis thought a shadow had settled over the light in Shary’s eyes, but he concluded he must have imagined it.

“Of course, it’s more than just mere decoration. If you charge it with mana, you should be able to summon the greatest, most powerful existence in the Dark Lords’ Armies and command it. Though the effect works only once.”

As Leonis explained the ring’s function boastfully, Shary quietly muttered something along the lines of “I would have preferred a regular one.” Her whisper failed to reach Leonis’s ears, however.

“Like a Greater Demon or an Elder Lich?” Shary asked.

“Well, I don’t know. We’d only know after you summon it.”

“I’ve no need for bodyguards. I am strong on my own.”

“Now, no need to say that. Take it. It may prove useful at some point down the line.”

“…Thank you, my lord.” Pinching up the hems of her skirt, Shary bowed her head and gave another curtsy. “Now, if you don’t mind, my lord, I must be off, or I’ll be late for my part-time job.”

Shary then sank silently into Leonis’s shadow.

◆

Leonis descended the dorm’s stairwell, making his way to the first floor. A large table was set in the common meeting room, where preparations for breakfast were underway. The tantalizing smell of consommé hung in the air.

Usually, his platoon had breakfast in their individual rooms, but today they had a meeting, so they’d decided to gather and have the meal together.

“Excuse me if I’m late.”

“Ah, Leo,” Riselia greeted him. “Oh, you have a bit of bedhead.”

The girl had spotted a clump of hair standing on end, but Leonis ducked to evade her.

“I—I can fix it myself, thank you,” he said awkwardly.

“And your necktie’s off,” Riselia appended, leaning forward to adjust it. Her argent locks shone beautifully, reflecting the sunlight streaming in through the window. Most vampires were nocturnal, but Riselia maintained a healthy, regulated lifestyle by waking up early every morning.

“There, all good,” she stated, patting down Leonis’s tie.

“…Thank you.”

Having passed his minion’s inspection, Leonis took a seat at the table. From the common area’s kitchen, he could hear the sound of a frying pan being vigorously stirred and the sizzling noises of something cooking.

Currently, the Hræsvelgr dorm’s only occupants were the members of the eighteenth platoon. Girls from other platoons lived here previously, but

the building was a ways off from Excalibur Academy's premises. Its outward facade was quite old and worn, making it unpopular among the student body.

No sooner had Leonis arrived than a door to one of the adjoining rooms opened, and a beautiful black-haired young woman entered: Elfiné Phillet, a girl two years older than Riselia and the platoon's honorary elder sister.

"Good morning, Leo," Elfiné greeted him a bit drowsily.

"Good morning, Miss Elfiné," Leonis replied.

Although usually prim and proper, Elfiné always seemed tired in the morning. Perhaps she suffered from low blood pressure. Her dark eyes were half closed. Even so, most male students would've still found her quite alluring.

With a gloomy expression, Elfiné took a seat opposite Leonis. She often made such faces when the first period that day was basic stamina training. Unlike the rest of the platoon, Elfiné's Holy Sword was an information-analysis type. She wasn't out on the field during combat training, so she was out of shape.

Truthfully, Leonis was just as poor an athlete as she was, so he greatly sympathized with her on this front.

"Are you tired, Miss Finé?" Riselia asked her anxiously.

"Yeah… Just a bit…," Elfiné answered with a stiff smile. "My elder sister's coming to visit from the Sixth Assault Garden."

"Your sister? Oh, you mean the senior researcher from the Phillet Company?" questioned Riselia.

"…Yes. My very talented elder sibling." Elfiné gave a heavy sigh. "She's so capable it scares me sometimes…"

Evidently, Elfiné wasn't anxious over stamina training this time.

"I spent all night trying to come up with ways to avoid her, so I hardly got any sleep."

"Wow. Is she really that scary?" Riselia pondered.

"She's a witch, that one. Or maybe a bloodsucking vampire."

"Erm…" Riselia gave a halfhearted reply, unsure how to respond.

Leonis was no stranger to having his blood sucked. It seemed that despite most monsters having died out in this era, vampires were still seen as creatures of legend.

"Miss Selia, breakfast's ready," a voice called out from the kitchen. Regina then walked into the room, clad in a maid uniform and carrying a silvery tray. "Oh, hey, kid. Good morning." Spotting Leonis, the pigtailed girl greeted him with a smile.

"Good morning, Miss Regina," Leonis replied. "Breakfast looks good."

The Undead King couldn't help but swallow expectantly. Placed on the table was a rather sumptuous breakfast. Consommé garnished with vegetables, an arugula salad—grown in Riselia's vegetable garden—with ham, cheese toast with lots of honey, walnut bread, coffee, fresh milk and

butter, and omelet rice made from eggs produced in the academy's natural district.

Having spent his time sleeping after using the Demon Sword, Leonis hadn't eaten anything in days, so breakfast looked all the more appetizing. Feeling his stomach churn in anticipation, Leonis cracked a smile.

My word. This body is so incorrigible.

When he was the Undead King, Leonis hadn't required sustenance. As such, Leonis found this form's susceptibility to hunger quite bothersome. Still, he'd learned to appreciate food.

"I'll put a special little flag on your omelet rice, kid," Regina teased.

"Don't treat me like a child," Leonis shot back, pulling out the flag she'd stabbed into his food.

"I guess Sakuya isn't back from her morning training," Riselia remarked, glancing at the door.

"Yes. I did tell her we have a meeting today, though…," Elfiné replied, knitting her brows.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it. Let's put aside some food for Sakuya and dig in," Riselia concluded.

"Right, we shouldn't let it go cold…" Elfiné nodded.

"Hey, kid, want me to draw you a heart on it with ketchup?" Regina suggested impishly.

"…I—I can put on my own condiments, thank you very much!" Leonis snapped at her.

"…Mm. Fine."

Regina dropped her shoulders, seemingly disappointed.

◆

"The Holy Light Festival…?" Leonis asked, actively avoiding the extra parsley on his plate.

"Yes, it's Excalibur Academy's school fair," Riselia explained. "It'll take place in a few days."

Next week, the Seventh Assault Garden was set to couple with the Sixth. The Assault Garden fleet was deployed around the world's oceans, with the capital, Camelot, as its core. Each city had a different tactical role assigned to it.

For example, the Seventh and Fifth Assault Gardens were offensive bases meant to discover and purge Void nests. The Sixth, by contrast, was in charge of providing supplies to the others. It sailed in areas of the ocean rich in mana resources, mining the seabed for mana crystals. This maintained the magical energy supply for Assault Gardens on the front lines.

Of course, the Seventh Assault Garden was capable of prolonged battles without any support, but working in tandem with the other Assault Gardens allowed for more efficient operations.

"…I see. Each base operates to its most efficient capacity." Leonis was impressed by this system. The Dark Lords' Armies had lacked such thinking.

If anything, each of the Dark Lords had a burning rivalry with the rest…

Dizolf, the Lord of Rage, and Veira, the Dragon Lord, had always been at odds with Leonis. Even when the Dark Lords' Armies were in an all-out war with the Six Heroes, they had kept engaging in skirmishes over possession of ruined territories and kingdoms.

That wasn't so much my fault as it was theirs, though, Leonis rationalized, thinking about the past.

The mana refueling would take three days, during which the two Assault Gardens would remain coupled. Over that period, the citizens of both cities would hold festivities to celebrate this yearly mingling.

"And during the Holy Light Festival, Excalibur Academy will open its facilities to the general public," stated Riselia.

"I see. As it happens, I enjoy festivals, too."

This reminded Leonis of the Death Festa. It was a type of magic ritual where thousands of undead souls would dance across ruined battlefields. The revelry lasted for several days, and once it concluded, the mana in those lands would be sucked up, converting the area into cursed grounds capable of producing many undead.

"Excalibur Academy's platoons are going to run all sorts of stalls and shops," Riselia detailed, shoveling more vegetables onto Leonis's plate. Leonis's minion wasted no chance to make his blood smoother and easier to drink.

"That's enough vegetables…," Leonis grumbled.

"Nope. I saw you push away your parsley, Leo," Riselia refused firmly.

"Ugh…"

"During the last Holy Light Festival, we turned this dorm into a café," Elfiné added, watching over the two of them with a smile.

Nodding, Riselia said, "It was pretty well received."

This is a fairly good location for a café, Leonis thought.

The forest growing in the back of the dorms offered a nice view, and since it was on the edge of Excalibur Academy's premises, it was a quiet spot, ideal for enjoying tea and sweets.

"But I thought we might want to change our approach a little this year," Elfiné continued.

"How come?" Riselia asked.

"Well, rumor has it that the Fafnir dorm's eleventh platoon is going to have a café."

The eleventh platoon. That was the one Fenris Edelritz, a member of the executive committee and a student who tended to butt heads with Riselia at every turn, was part of. The eleventh platoon's dorm had a far more extravagant interior design than the Hræsvelgr one, and it was equipped with a jet bath, which Leonis could only assume was the name of some tactical weapon.

“They’re definitely doing it to spite us!” Riselia declared.

“No, it’s because Lady Fenris really loves you, Lady Selia,” Regina muttered as she took a sip of tea. “Still, our building’s pretty far from theirs, so having another café isn’t too bad of an idea.”

The Fafnir dorm was close to the center of the academy. As such, it was pretty far from where the eighteenth platoon lived, so there wasn’t much competition.

“No, last year they ran a dance hall.” Riselia shook her head. “They’d only choose to do a café to poach our business. They must still be angry about losing during the practice match.”

“…I can imagine Lady Fenris doing that, actually,” Regina admitted as she peeled the shell off a hard-boiled egg.

“Honestly, I can’t see us beating them if we just default to what we did last year…,” Riselia said.

“Yeah. Compared to the Fafnir dorm, ours looks pretty bad,” Regina agreed.

“And for some reason, there’s been a lot of creepy ravens roosting around here…,” Elfiné whispered with a frown.

“R-really?!” Riselia asked, her expression visibly panicked.

The crows flocking around their dorm had undoubtedly been drawn there by her Vampire Queen mana. It usually would attract bats or wolves, but the only minions of the night living in this city were ravens.

“B-but, erm, ravens can be pretty cute!” Riselia argued, trying to save her minions’ dignity.

Regina, however, wasn’t having it. “Their cawing is loud, and they keep fishing through our trash.”

“W-well…” Unable to think of a response, Riselia sank slightly.

“Speaking of, I’ve seen some strange grass growing in our backyard,” Elfiné recalled with a puzzled expression.

Now it was Leonis’s turn to look flustered. In an attempt to cheer Leonis up, Shary had decided to grow some underworld plants in the rear garden. The seeds she’d planted were budding and beginning to creep over the dorm’s outer wall. If allowed to grow to maturity, they would become a rather magnificent man-eating carnivorous plant.

“With the way this place looks, every customer will be too scared to come in…,” Regina remarked in a low voice.

That was when…

“Sorry for being late, everyone.”

The door opened, revealing a short blue-haired girl—Sakuya Sieglinde. An adept swordswoman and the eighteenth platoon’s ace attacker, despite her young age of fourteen.

“Where were you, Sakuya?” asked Riselia.

“Oh, I happened upon Fluffymaru the Black during my morning training,” the girl explained, spreading her traditional Sakura Orchid outfit on the chair.

“Oh, that ghost dog that pops up around the dorms?” Regina questioned.

“He’s not a ghost. Holy Swordsmen from the executive committee were chasing him, so I had him take cover in the woods.”

Upon closer inspection, Sakuya’s uniform had a lot of leaves sticking to it.

What in the world are you doing, Blackas? Leonis couldn’t help but fidget a little since he knew perfectly well who that dog truly was.

“If it’s a stray, shouldn’t you just let them get rid of it?” Regina suggested, gesturing as if she was cocking an imaginary hunting rifle. “Academy students can defend themselves, but civilians will be walking around here once the Holy Light Festival starts.”

“Fluffymaru the Black isn’t a stray!” Sakuya shook her head desperately. “He might be Maru the Black’s long-lost reincarnation!”

That’s unlikely, Leonis thought.

First of all, Blackas wasn’t a dog, but a wolf. He was also the prince of the Realm of Shadows.

“We probably could keep it here in the dorm if you promise to take care of it, Sakuya,” Riselia said, holding up her index finger.

“Much appreciated, Miss Selia,” Sakuya answered. “However, whenever I try to catch Fluffymaru the Black, he seems to vanish.”

“That’s why they call him a ghost dog,” Regina chimed in.

“Oh, speaking of, I saw a ghost girl the other day,” Riselia recalled, suddenly remembering.

Regina perked up a bit at that. “I saw her, too! She was really cute, right?”

“A ghost girl?” Elfiné questioned dubiously.

“Yeah, there’ve been rumors about her recently. People say you can see a mysterious girl in a maid’s uniform going around this dorm…”

What in the world are you doing, Shary?!

As he listened to the girls’ conversation, Leonis made a note to chide his minions as he tried to swallow a piece of bread.

“A creepy mansion… Ghosts… Oh, I’ve got it!” Riselia’s face lit up, as if she’d finally realized something.

“What’s wrong, Lady Selia?” Regina asked her.

“What about a haunted mansion theme? We can make it a spooky café!” Riselia stood as she made her declaration. Everyone else present regarded her with confused looks.

◆

“Ugh… Nngh, aaah…”

A girl’s pained moans filled an empty back alley in the Seventh Assault Garden’s outer rim. In contrast to the Central Garden area, where Excalibur Academy was, this sector was home to many refugees rescued from outside the city.

Shambling along, the girl crouched down, having exhausted her strength completely. Her verdant hair was tied in a ponytail. The white thighs peeking from under her shorts were now covered in soot. As she leaned against the wall, the hood of her modest robe flipped up, revealing a beautiful girl with fae-like features and blue eyes. The ears peeking out were elongated and came to sharp points. These were the characteristics of an elf.

How…did it come to this…?

This was Arle Kirlesio, an elven hero who had been tasked with destroying the Goddess of Rebellion's vessel by the Sanctuary's Elder Tree.

I was prepared for this, of course. But…

She'd never imagined the world could change so much after a thousand years. Humankind had created mobile fortress cities, and the monsters menacing this world were not goblins or orcs, but unknown life-forms called Voids.

Following the battle on the Third Assault Garden, Riselia's group had taken custody of Arle and brought her to the city as a refugee. As soon as she'd spotted an opening, however, she'd taken it and escaped. Although Arle felt guilty about it, she couldn't let those girls discover who she was.

While she'd destroyed one of the Goddess of Rebellion's incarnations, there were others.

I have to complete my mission as a hero.

Unfortunately, she couldn't even manage to stand anymore due to hunger. One couldn't so much as buy a piece of bread in this city if they weren't registered as a citizen. And a hero of her caliber couldn't lower herself to petty thievery.

Nng, I have to do something…

She couldn't afford to collapse here.

"Hmm, excuse me… Are you all right?" A frightened voice reached Arle's ears.

Still squatting down, Arle looked up to see a seven- or eight-year-old girl peering down at her.

"Are you hungry?" the child asked.

"…Mm." Arle nodded after a moment's hesitation.

The girl fearfully approached and handed her a piece of bread.

"…" Arle eyed her carefully.

"Go ahead. Eat it," urged the girl.

"…Are you sure?" Arle asked. She examined the girl's attire. Her clothes didn't suggest that she came from a wealthy home.

"Director Phrenia says we should help when we see someone in need," the child said with a smile.

"…Thank you." Arle accepted the offering, tearing a piece off and putting it into her mouth.

"Ah, do you need some water…?" the girl inquired.

“No, I have my own.” Arle took out a flask and washed down the bread. She could feel her stomach churn in appreciation. “Thank you. You saved me.”

“Um, would you like to come with me to the orphanage?”

The elf shook her head. “I couldn’t possibly impose on you that much.”

Inconveniencing a stranger like that simply wouldn’t do. Arle slowly rose to her feet, but then…

“What are you doing here?!” With that loud shout, several figures appeared in the alley.

“…?!”

These weren’t thieves, but Holy Swordsmen, dressed in blue uniforms. Arle assumed they were part of a militia of sorts, the city’s peacekeepers.

“Hmm, you’re an elf,” a young man who looked like the group’s leader commented, glaring at Arle.

“…”

“Show me your citizen’s certificate,” he demanded, rudely looking the elf up and down.

“N-no, this lady, she’s just hungry…,” the girl protested.

“Think you can boss me around, little refugee?” The young man regarded the girl with a glance before approaching her menacingly.

Arle pulled off her robe, discarding it to the winds. Manifesting the Dark Lord–slaying blade, Crozax, in her hands, she glared at him. “You should step back…,” she told the child who had helped her.

There are three of them, and they seem fairly organized.

Based on how they carried themselves, Arle could roughly gauge their strength. Normally, they’d be no match for her. In fact, they likely couldn’t even defeat the blue-haired girl she exchanged blows with in the ruined city, either.

But right now, Arle could barely stand, and a hero couldn’t go around killing people.

“You’re resisting, I see. Activate!” The young leader manifested a bulky great sword–type Holy Sword. His lips curled up into a smirk. “This might get rough, girl…”

As the weapon bore down on her, Arle deflected it with Crozax.

“…Tch, get back!” she snapped at the girl behind her again.

“M-Miss…,” the child stuttered.

“You’re in the way. Hurry!”

Arle heard the sound of retreating footsteps behind her.

Good. Arle gripped her sword tighter and hopped back. Suddenly, something was tossed into the alley, rolling up to Arle’s feet with a clattering sound.

Is this some kind of bomb…? No, this is—

Psssssssssssssssssst!

The canister between Arle and the Holy Swordsmen began to produce heavy white smoke.

“Wh-what?! Is this a…smoke grenade?!”

A curtain of vapor quickly filled the narrow street, leaving the brutish Holy Swordsmen confused.

Wh-what…?!

Arle began to cough. Just then, a maintenance hole cover next to her feet rose slightly.

“…?!”

“Over here. Come with me if you want to escape!”

A girl with her face concealed behind a cowl peeked out from under the metal lid and gestured for Arle to approach.

“You’re—”

“Hurry up,” the hooded figure urged.

The city’s alarm blared, and Arle caught the sound of multiple sets of feet marching toward the alley. Steeling her resolve, the elf slipped into the shaft.

CHAPTER 2
THE DARK LORD ZOL VADIS

“That reminds me. They still haven’t found that elf girl, right?” Riselia remarked. She, Regina, and Leonis were on their way to the library during their lunch break.

“Oh yeah. Miss Finé is looking for her, though,” Regina said.

“She didn’t go through her citizen registration… I wonder what she’s up to.”

Riselia and Regina were discussing the girl they’d found on the Third Assault Garden.

Unbeknownst to them, that elf was actually the Hero of the Sanctuary—Arle Kirlesio.

As soon as the eighteenth platoon had returned to the Seventh Assault Garden, Arle had disappeared. She’d done so before registering as a citizen, which made it more difficult to track her. Leonis was quite anxious as to her whereabouts, albeit for his own reasons. This elf hero was the protégé of Shardark Ignis Sabane, the Swordmaster of the Six Heroes and the same person who’d trained Leonis. In other words, she was his sibling apprentice.

She also wielded the Demon Smiting Sword, Crozax, one of the Arc Seven, a collection of Dark Lord–slaying weapons. Arle had made multiple attempts on the Undead King’s life in the distant past.

Though I never faced her myself.

What was a hero like her doing in this era? Her presence here was probably the doing of the Sanctuary’s Elder Tree. Sensing the Goddess of Rebellion might reincarnate a millennia later, it had sent an assassin to destroy her.

Well, she isn’t that major of a threat. I can leave her alone for now, decided Leonis.

The odds of Arle having some direct connection to Nefakess Reizaad were low. It seemed she still hadn’t realized Leonis was a Dark Lord, so he could ignore her for a while. Perhaps she’d even prove useful at some point.

As Leonis mulled over such things, he, Riselia, and Regina arrived at the library.

“All right. Let’s split up and look for some materials,” Riselia declared, as if bracing herself.

They’d come here to gather reference materials for their haunted café. Riselia’s idea was to use the Hræsvelgr dorm’s aged appearance to their advantage, creating a spooky but enjoyable atmosphere for the visitors.

Back in Leonis's time, the undead ran rampant, and the somewhat perverted idea of enjoying horror hadn't existed. Since then, it seemed humanity had normalized incorporating fear as a form of entertainment.

I swear. It's utterly baffling. Cracking a strained smile, Leonis looked up. Spirits in the form of shining owls fluttered among the bookshelves, functioning as librarians.

I could lend her books from my personal library, but…

The tomes Leonis kept were all magical grimoires, and reading them could rob one of their sanity.

"Here we go…" Regina grunted, carrying in a heavy pile of books.

Due to some personal circumstances, Regina was capable of controlling spirits, so she could have the owls flying around help her locate what they needed.

"There sure are a lot of them…"

The volumes Regina had gathered described monsters from an assortment of ancient myths. Skeletons, walking dead, ghosts, vampires. There were illustrations based on materials found in old ruins, too.

Leonis keenly noted a few mistaken descriptions in the text. For instance, it said Death Shades devoured people's life force, but that was actually the predilection of Soul Eaters. Of course, the two creatures were similar in appearance, so he couldn't fault the humans of the later ages for confusing them.

However, there were some entries that even Leonis, magnanimous though he was, couldn't tolerate. Foremost among them was the passage on Elder Liches, which claimed they commanded all types of undead.

Fools. I am the one and only Undead King.

"Is something wrong, Leo?" Riselia peered into his face, noticing his grimace.

"No, nothing. I was just curious…" Leonis gave a dry cough.

"Look, Miss Selia," Regina whispered as she flipped through a book. "Vampires are really scary. It says they suck people's blood to turn them into their minions."

"…Y-yeah. It's spooky," Riselia replied falteringly, looking away.

"Still, these aren't all that helpful," Regina admitted with a frown.

"Yes, if only we had something more tangible…," Riselia agreed.

"How about some footage?" the blond maid proposed.

"…Footage?" Riselia parroted.

"Yeah. I checked out a lot of them!" Regina replied, placing some videos on the table with a little "ta-daa!"

Looking at their packages, Riselia frowned.

"Hmm… Aren't these movies kind of scary?"

"Yeah! I was looking for frightening ones."

"Could you watch them with me, Regina…?"

"Sorry, I can't. I have sharpshooting practice after this," Regina said with a shrug.

Riselia turned her eyes to Leonis. “Leo, watch the movies with me!”

“I don’t mind, but…”

“You can’t, Lady Selia,” Regina chimed in. “It says these aren’t suitable for children age twelve and below.”

“Huh?!” Riselia looked mortified.

“I guess that’s that…,” Leonis stated. He couldn’t help but feel that an undead being afraid of other undead was a problem. He sympathized with Riselia, but if she was going to run the Dark Lords’ Armies, she’d need to handle skeletons and zombies more maturely.

“L-Leo, you bully…!” Riselia whined, tears in her eyes.

Suddenly, Leonis’s small communication terminal rang from in his breast pocket. “Oh, my apologies…,” he said, looking down at the device.

The call was from the Demon Wolf Pack. He’d forbidden them from contacting him unless it was dire.

Does this mean something’s happened?

“I’m sorry, I remembered some urgent business,” Leonis remarked, putting away his terminal.

“Huh? Hey, Leo…!” Riselia hurriedly called after him, looking like she was about to cry.

After exiting the library, Leonis swiftly plunged into the nearby shadows.

◆

Passing through a shadow corridor, Leonis instantaneously entered the Dark Lord’s palace. Utilizing shadow corridors was a power typically unique to denizens of the Realm of Shadows, like Blackas and Shary. However, Leonis had reached the zenith of magical prowess and was able to use them as well, albeit in a more limited fashion.

The Seventh Assault Garden’s special demi-human protection ward featured a massive artificial natural environment. Its trees filtered seawater and contributed to the city’s food production. This was the home of demi-human refugees, like the beastmen and the elves.

On the seventh underground stratum of the special demi-human protection ward, connected by countless tree roots, was a large domed space. Normally, it was a warehouse meant for emergency provisions, but Leonis had requisitioned it, turning it into a base for the Dark Lords’ Armies.

It’s a bit dreary at present, I admit. But I will one day renovate it into a castle worthy of being home for the Undead King.

Leonis took a seat on the skeletal throne he’d prepared. He’d previously tried to fill his room in the girls’ dorms with bone art, but Riselia had scolded him for it. Here, he could decorate freely, however.

“Mantle of Illusions,” Leonis called, and his form was shrouded with a dark mist. When it cleared, a king clad in a skull mask and covered in a dark cloak stood in his place. In this form, Leonis went by the identity of Zol Vadis. That was the name of an ancient Dark Lord who’d reigned over the

world before the Goddess of Rebellion and the Eight Dark Lords rose to power.

Leonis himself had defeated Zol Vadis when he was still a hero. Leonis assuming his name was his way of showing respect to this olden Dark Lord.

“I am the Dark Lord Zol Vadis,” Leonis said, revealing a change of voice. “You may enter…”

His voice echoed heavily through the vast space. The tree roots that sealed the place twisted and disentangled, opening like a gate. On the other side were two kneeling figures.

“Division commander for the beastman army, Zarik Mashid,” stated a large werewolf.

“Division commander for the fairy army, Lena Darkleaf,” spoke a dark elf girl.

These were two high-ranking officers in Leonis’s newly formed Demon Wolf Pack.

“To what end did you beckon me?” demanded “Zol Vadis,” the gravitas of his voice forcing the air to vibrate.

“O-our apologies, Your Greatness,” the dark elf girl expressed, visibly sweating. “But we’ve run into a situation that’s beyond our capacity to control… A monster appeared in your castle’s underground labyrinth.”

“What?”

Leonis had created a subterranean maze using the Create Labyrinth spell to grant the Demon Wolf Pack a proper hiding place. This formed a large complex of tunnels somewhere in the world, as well as a unique teleportation gate that connected to it.

That a monster had appeared wasn’t too unusual. Labyrinths naturally matured and improved themselves to better ensnare and devour the souls of adventurers who challenged them.

Leonis had been expecting monsters to form and intended to have them train the Demon Wolf Pack. However, his underground labyrinth had been growing slowly. It should not have produced any creatures that were more than his minions could handle.

“What kind of monster?” the Dark Lord asked the shivering girl.

“A gigantic…lizard!” she replied.

“What?!” Leonis found himself rising from his throne. “You can’t possibly mean a dragon?! Are you sure you saw it correctly?”

“W-we can’t be sure,” the large beastman said. “But all I can tell is that it’s massive, and….”

“…”

The notion that the labyrinth had produced a dragon after only a few weeks was unthinkable. At best, it should have been capable of nothing but skeletons. There was one other possibility, however…

…Did it connect to a dragon’s lair?

The maze had formed in a random location. However unlikely, it was possible that an underground dragon roost still remained somewhere, and the labyrinth broke into it.

But I thought the creatures of my age had become extinct…

“Was that monster rampaging?” questioned Zol Vadis.

“No, it looked like it was asleep,” replied the werewolf man.

“I see. Lead me to it.”

The Dark Lord Zol Vadis rose from his throne.

◆

Passing through the gate set inside the underground passage, Leonis teleported into the labyrinth. Monsters didn’t appear on its first level, and it was mostly a space for storing the Demon Wolf Pack’s food and supplies.

Leonis had his own treasure vault in the Realm of Shadows, but its custodian, Shary, had been warning him recently that it was overcrowded.

“So on what strata did the dragon appear?” the Dark Lord inquired.

“It was in an unexplored area in the fifth level…,” responded the dark elf girl.

“The fifth, you say. How about this, then…?” Leonis, still as Zol Vadis, pointed to the floor.

“Graz Garud!”

Brrrrrrrrrr…!

Carefully regulating the spell’s power, he fired an eighth-order earth spell. The labyrinth trembled, and a large, gaping hole opened in the ground.

“Y-Your Greatness?” The dark elf girl, who had fallen backward from the shaking, looked at him with shock.

“I tore open the way down to the fifth floor,” Leonis told his two servants. “Descending normally would be too bothersome.”

A fully matured labyrinth would’ve resisted his magic, but this one was still fresh. After a few days, the structure would naturally patch up this hole with its mana.

“Let’s be off,” commanded the Dark Lord.

““Y-yes…!”” Lena and Zarik said in unison.

Leonis chanted a spell, forming a gravity field that enveloped the three of them. They levitated softly and then descended into the pit.

“Eeeek!”

“Y-Your Greatness, we’re floating…!”

Leonis’s heart danced with excitement, and he remained heedless of his officers’ cries of surprise.

A dragon… What sort of variant might it be? Fire? Lightning?

Of all monsters, Leonis preferred dragons. They reigned sovereign over all monsters as tyrants of the sky. They were proud, extremely powerful, and highly intelligent. The skull dragon he commanded had once been an

overwhelmingly powerful Dragon Lord who had oppressed countless of its kind in life.

I thought them extinct, but perhaps a few survived underground.

"Grrrrrrrrrrrrr." A mighty, rumbling growl reverberated from the bottom of the hole.

"Your Greatness, did the explosion earlier wake it up?" Zarik asked anxiously.

"Perhaps it did. So much the better…," answered the Dark Lord.

It took them a full five minutes to reach the bottom of the shaft Leonis had created. After lighting a flame at the end of his staff, Leonis had Zarik and Lena lead him through the maze. The howl they heard earlier grew closer with every step.

Booooooom!

Suddenly, a huge maw crashed through the walls.

"…?!" Leonis's eyes widened in astonishment.

The sheer size of its head easily exceeded five meils. Were it to open its jaw fully, it could consume their entire room. However, what shocked Leonis the most wasn't its proportions.

"This isn't a dragon," he pointed out calmly.

"Huh…?" Lena said, dumbfounded.

This is just a Greater Maze Worm!

Leonis let out a disappointed sigh behind his skull mask. Greater Maze Worms were large monsters who made their homes underground, rising to the surface to swallow cattle whole. Although unquestionably imposing creatures, they lacked intelligence and weren't capable of flight.

I can't fault them for mistaking it for a dragon. They've never seen a real one, after all…

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" The massive beast let out an angry howl, lunging at Leonis and his servants in the hope of devouring them.

"…G-Great One!" Lena squeaked.

"Fear not. Who do you take me for?" Leonis thrust his staff toward the worm's open jaw. "Insolent fool. Farga!"

Booooooom!

A sphere of incandescent-white fire erupted inside the monster's mouth, blowing its head off.

"Oooh…," Zarik, having stumbled back in fear, exclaimed in admiration.

The worm thrashed wildly, bashing its body against the labyrinth's walls.

"I-it's still alive?!" Lena exclaimed.

"Giant Maze Worms don't die from losing their heads. They have powerful regenerative powers."

Now what, though…? Leonis thought, pensively bringing a hand to his chin.

Killing this monster and using its bones to create an Undead Worm could be amusing, but rationally speaking, he had encroached upon its nest. The

creature's meager intellect wasn't capable of understanding that it was disrespecting the Undead King.

Shrugging, Leonis released his Aura of Death to make himself menacing even to this lowly being. As soon as he did, the worm started wiggling and then burrowed into the ground, disappearing into the depths.

Be grateful that I am a forgiving lord.

The Lord of Beasts, Lord of Rage, or the Dragon Lord would have simply reduced the monster to dust.

"Having felt such terror, I doubt it will ever appear here again," Leonis stated confidently. With that, he turned to look to his underlings. "…?!"

Zarik and Lena had quite literally been petrified from being exposed to his Aura of Death.

◆

Passing through the labyrinth's gate, Leonis returned to the base in the bowels of the Seventh Assault Garden, where he returned his servants' stone bodies to flesh.

My word. This is what they call premature joy.

Leonis sighed in disappointment under his mask. He wasn't angry with Zarik and Lena for their mistake, however. If he desired servants who were simply loyal and made no mistakes, a legion of the undead would have sufficed.

"Your power was amazing, Your Greatness!" Zarik praised, overwhelmed with emotion. "You defeated that frightening monster so easily."

"With your strength, you could rule over the entire world, Your Greatness!" Lena appended, bowing her head to the floor.

If only it were as simple as that. Leonis couldn't help but smirk bitterly, recalling his painful experiences from a thousand years ago.

Despite their great power, the goddess Roselia and her mighty Eight Dark Lords had lost to humanity in the end. Humans were not to be underestimated. Individually, they were weak and brittle, but collectively, their vitality and determination were paramount. Even now, faced with the new menace of the Voids, humankind proved tenacious. They'd discovered the power of Holy Swords and developed a civilization run by advanced magical technology.

In the end, I'm nothing more than a piece of ancient history.

That was why he kept his pride at bay and blended in by living as a mere student at Excalibur Academy.

Yes, as a student…

This reminded Leonis that he had a lecture on anti-Void tactical theory coming up soon. If he was late, there was no telling what the lecturer, Instructor Diglassê, might say.

"The monster has been taken care of," Leonis announced, flapping his dark cloak. "I leave the rest to you."

"Ah, oh, erm, w-wait, Your Greatness." Lena stopped him.

“What is it?” the Dark Lord questioned, turning to face the young woman.

“I have a report to make,” she explained.

“…I very much hope that, whatever this is, it’s worthy of my attention,” Leonis said with irritation slipping into his tone.

At this rate, he wouldn’t arrive to class on time. The shadow corridor would allow him to travel instantly, but he couldn’t very well go into a lesson looking like this.

“This is crucial information we’ve received from the Sovereign Wolf remnants in the Imperial Capital,” she explained.

“…Let’s hear it.”

“A few weeks ago, the Sixth Assault Garden’s government general sent a large-scale expedition to the old Kingdom of Frosthaven, in the tundra lands to the north.”

Frosthaven. That wasn’t a nation Leonis was familiar with. It must have been established after he’d been sealed.

“Hmm. And?” he urged her to continue.

“They exhumed something there and brought it back to the Sixth Assault Garden.”

“What did they discover?”

“That’s yet to be confirmed,” Lena admitted with a shake of her head. “This is just conjecture, but I think it’s possible they discovered an Origin Spirit sealed in the ice.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?” Leonis pressed, his interest piqued.

Spirits were manifestations of nature’s power. In particular, the Spirit King, born of the planet’s core, wielded power comparable to the gods and the Dark Lords. From what Leonis understood, most natural spirits had died out, though.

“Because the leader of the expedition is a high-ranking official from the Phillet household.”

The Phillet household. That’s Miss Elfiné’s family…

The Phillet Company was an imperial enterprise. It was in charge of research and development of the Artificial Elementals used to control the magical apparatuses in the Assault Gardens. An expert on spirits had been part of this excursion.

“Assuming what they brought aboard the Sixth Assault Garden was a sealed Origin Spirit, if we steal it, we could use it to take charge of an Assault Garden’s control core,” Lena elaborated.

“…I see.”

The royal family’s vessel, the *Hyperion*, was steered by Princess Altiria’s spirit, Carbuncle. If Leonis had an Origin Spirit, perhaps he could use it to seize the city.

“I think the coupling with the Sixth Assault Garden is a prime chance for us to steal away the spirit!” Lena stated, kneeling before Leonis.

“Your Greatness, give us the order to take it,” Zarik entreated, his head bowed.

After a moment of contemplation, the Dark Lord replied, “There is merit to the idea.”

“Oooh. Do you mean…?!” Zarik glanced up eagerly.

Leonis was interested in the spirits. A high-ranking one could live for a century or more. However…

This is all a bit too reckless.

All he had at his command were the remnants of a terrorist group that hadn’t even undergone sufficient training yet. Their standard weapons were of no use against Holy Sword wielders. Staging a heist was impossible. Of course, Leonis could go and do it himself, but that ran the risk of exposing his identity.

There’s no proof it’s even an Origin Spirit in the first place.

Leonis didn’t have enough information to make a move. The time might come to pounce on this opportunity soon, but it wasn’t now. After his defeat one thousand years ago, Leonis had learned to cast aside his pride and err on the side of caution.

“I’ll keep that information in mind. But right now—”

Just then, a cheery ringtone sounded.

…?!

It was a message from Instructor Diglassê. Leonis hurriedly thrashed inside his coat.

“Y-Your Greatness, what’s the matter?”

“It is my time to return to the darkness of chaos! You are to remain vigilant at all times,” he hastily stated.

“”Y-yes, my lord…!””

Bowing respectfully, the werewolf and dark elf saw Leonis off as he quickly plunged into a shadow corridor.

◆

“Now, Charlotte, you put in too much sugar!”

“Huh? Isn’t it better when it’s sweeter?”

“The sugar will burn if you do that!”

Shary’s superior shrugged theatrically in exasperation. The assassin maid frowned, stopping partway through mixing the batter.

I suppose it’s not that easy…

Shary had recently started working a part-time job at a confectionery, under the pseudonym of Charlotte. Since Shary didn’t have a citizen’s certificate, she used her Evil Eye of Domination to get the work.

Having this kind of position might prove helpful somehow, the dark-haired girl justified. That was only one reason she started working there, though. Another was that it allowed her to snatch and eat assorted treats.

…I hope my lord will like this.

Most of all, Shary simply wanted to give Leonis some handmade sweets. Prior to his rebirth, Leonis had been undead and hadn't required sustenance. Thus, despite being his personal maid, Shary never had a reason to polish her cooking skills. Things were different now that Leonis had a human body. He was also a child, which gave him a penchant for sugar.

Determined not to lose out to her master's new minion, Riselia Crystalia, Shary had resolved to develop her confectionary skills. After all, she was the Dark Lord's one and only personal maid.

Unfortunately, despite her determination and effort, her skills when it came to baking were lacking.

Driving a knife through an enemy's back is so much simpler. Shary sighed, looking reproachfully at the small mountain of failed cookies she'd made.

"Well, we'll be having a lot of customers on the day of the Holy Light Festival. Work hard!" her senior pâtissier said encouragingly, to which Shary nodded.

Her superior was making a sponge cake with lots of fruit kneaded into it. Shary was born in the Realm of Shadows, where the concept of color didn't exist, so just seeing such a brilliant thing filled her heart with excitement. All her time as an assassin had never made her feel this way.

Shary Corvette Shadow Assassin was initially a weapon of murder, created by the Realm of Shadows' assassination society, the Septentrion. She had made seven attempts on the Undead King's life, failing every single time. Thinking back on it, Leonis had likely been toying with her all along. The Undead King had not once sought to claim her life in retribution.

Before her final attack, the Septentrion had ordered her to self-destruct. However, Leonis had successfully wiped away the Death Detonation Curse that had been etched into her heart.

When asked why he did it, Leonis answered, "You're the same as I was, once."

Having been cast aside by the society, Shary became his personal maid. That was the first time color had bloomed in the assassin's world.

My lord gave me all that I have. A heart, colors… Everything. So I…

"Hmm, Charlotte? What's this?" the pâtissier girl asked with a befuddled expression.

Looking down, Shary realized that while she'd been lost in reverie, she'd unconsciously shaped all her cookies like skulls.

Aaah, thinking of my lord made my hands move on their own…!

◆

"…Grr, Regina, why did you make me watch this kind of stuff?!"

Having returned to her dorm room, Riselia dumped the books she'd borrowed from the library onto her desk. She'd tried to watch the horror

movies Regina picked out for her but hadn't made it more than an hour before growing too frightened.

"And Leo's gone off somewhere, too…"

Although, Riselia had learned that Leonis disappearing for no apparent reason was to be expected.

We can watch them together when he comes back. I won't be as scared if I'm not alone…

Nodding to herself, Riselia sorted the volumes she'd taken out for reference based on subject. Tomorrow, she and the rest of the eighteenth platoon would be reading through them for research.

Today, I should work on decoding this, *however.* Riselia opened her desk drawer, retrieving a different book. It was the one she'd discovered on her father's desk in the Crystalia Estate's study—the only memento she was able to recover of her lost childhood home.

She leafed through the pages carefully, so as not to damage them. The text was written in an unknown language even Riselia, as well versed as she was in ancient dialects, couldn't decipher. Human and elven vocabulary, while different, had some commonalities. This language appeared wholly alien, though.

What was this strange book doing on her father's desk on the Third Assault Garden's final day?

If only I could have met Father's soul.

The key for decoding this writing was in eleven slips of paper, inserted behind the book's binding. Riselia's father had created this method of translation. Using these notes, Riselia gradually read through the book.

"That one is…Dark Lord and…hero and…annihilation of…"

One term was repeated time and again—Dark Lord.

"Dark Lord…"

When Riselia was little, her father would often tell her a fairy tale. In it, a terrible, frightening being would destroy the world.

"One Dark Lord…governed the skies… Its name… Viora…? Of the undead… Le…Nas…? Oh, drat, how do proper nouns work in this language…?"

Faced with this book, written in a language she didn't know, Riselia cradled her head, perplexed.

◆

In the depths of the Sixth Assault Garden's anti-Void countermeasure laboratory's eleventh underground level, enclosed by countless partitions and bulkheads, was the massive ice block exhumed in the old Frosthaven territories.

This facility was the only place that could house the massive, forty-meil object. The frozen thing was still giving off cold waves, causing frost to form on the sealed sector's walls.

The ice was a kind of cursed seal. Normal fire couldn't hope to melt it. Even anti-Void depth charges and Holy Swords capable of producing intense flames were ineffective. No one knew how the gigantic creature contained within came to be trapped.

"It almost looks alive, Research Officer Phillet," one suited man said. He was the Phillet Company's overseer. His job was to monitor Clauvia's activities and then report them in detail to her father. Clauvia's dad was very much a monster in human form. The sort who was sure he could dominate everything and anything. He likely thought even this ancient being could be kept under his thumb, too.

"That's because it is. It's survived in there for the last thousand years…" a beautiful black-haired woman in a lab coat replied. Clauvia Phillet checked something on her terminal before she continued speaking. "For now, it's just sleeping…"

"A living specimen of an extinct ancient life-form—a dragon. If we can analyze the source of its power, the imperial prince and Count Phillet will be overjoyed."

"…Yes, they will," Clauvia stated coldly, nodding.

The sound of footsteps clicking against the floor filled the room as a white-haired young man clad in white priest's garb appeared from the corridor. "My oh my, what a spectacle."

"Cardinal Nefakess, whatever are you doing here?" the suited man asked.

Clauvia furrowed her brow. Cardinal Nefakess had been dispatched from the capital's Human Church, an organization on poor terms with the Phillet Company. Undoubtedly, this person had been sent to watch over Clauvia.

Everyone certainly is overzealous about this, aren't they? Sighing internally, Clauvia felt her lips curl into a frown.

Nefakess grinned as he looked up at the ice block. "So this is the ancient creature you excavated in the tundra, I see. Simply wonderful." He then turned to face Clauvia. "I took the liberty of reading through your thesis. The theory you established was that the Voids are, in fact, ancient creatures resurrected by the planet's power, yes?"

"Yes. Until several decades ago, the prominent theory was that the Voids were alien life-forms that appeared from some alternate dimension. However, excavations in recent years have made it clear that Voids bear characteristics unique to ancient life-forms from this world, like nightmares that have jumped to life from our fairy tales. Analysis of this specimen may help us advance our knowledge of Voids," Clauvia detailed.

"Well, I sincerely hope so. Our most earnest wish is to see your research help wipe the Voids off the face of this world." Nefakess regarded her with a gentle smile and nodded. "May the blessing of the planet be upon humankind."

"…May the blessing of the planet be upon humankind." After returning the man's quote, taken from the scripture of the Human Church—Clauvia turned her back on him.

◆

"Clauvia Phillet. She is a fascinating human, I'll admit."

With the research officer gone, Nefakess remained alone in the sealed sector, whispering to himself.

"Who knows. She might be a suitable vessel for the goddess herself…," he said, looking up at the giant ice block. "So this is where you were, proud sovereign among sovereigns…"

Kneeling reverently, he took a triangular black stone out of his pocket. It was like a *lump of nothingness, chiseled out of the empty expanse*. A stone that did not reflect light.

A Void Origin—a Trapezohedron.

He began chanting otherworldly words, and Void energy began seeping out of the stone, invading and polluting the ice block thought to be impenetrable.

"I solemnly hope that you will prove to be a suitable vessel…"

Rising to his feet silently, Nefakess Reizaad turned to the darkness behind him. At first, it seemed no one was there, but the shadows soon began writhing.

"Shade Fiend," Nefakess called.

"Present," a collection of rumbling, overlaid whispers answered.

"I must request something of you."

"Ask us anything, Cardinal."

"I want you to go to a place called Excalibur Academy on the Seventh Assault Garden. There, I need you to look for someone… No, *someone* isn't quite right, is it? I want you to find a vampire."

"…A vampire. Do such things still exist in this age?"

"Yes, I was quite surprised to discover as much myself. But it is not so unimaginable. You're still here, after all."

"Keh-eh-eh… Indeed." Spiderlike shadows cackled eerily, squirming in the darkness.

Shade Fiends were demonic assassins summoned by Nefakess, eliminators affiliated with the Realm of Shadows' assassination society, the Septentrion. No one was better suited for tracking and hunting down a target.

"Are we to kill this vampire?"

"No, I want to torture her for information," Nefakess stated, shaking his head with a serene smile. "Bring her to a state of near death if you must, but you must not completely destroy her."

That undead girl he'd run into in the ruined city was undoubtedly involved in Tearis Resurrectia's destruction.

"The beauteous, silver-haired vampire. Bring her to me."

CHAPTER 3
THE SHADE FIENDS CREEP CLOSER

It was dusk. Having finished his lectures, Leonis was on his way back to his room at the dorm, only to discover…

"…This place is looking rather…interesting."

Colorful cloths were scattered all over the floor.

"Ah, welcome back, Leo," Riselia greeted him, sitting in front of a sewing machine.

"I'm here, too, kid," Regina added, turning to face him.

"Did you come up with costume designs?" he asked.

"Well, we looked into all sorts of materials and decided that going with cute ones would be best," Regina replied.

"Ugh, after we went to the trouble of getting all that reference material…" Riselia sighed wearily.

"Well, no one's going to come into a café if we look scary, would they?" Regina shrugged.

"I guess…," Riselia mumbled.

"Either way, I see you've already found a direction," remarked Leonis with a nod.

The sewing machines' ticking sounds filled the room. Finding Regina at work was one thing, since she was a maid, but Leonis was surprised Riselia was sewing.

Those two are more dexterous than I thought, Leonis thought, oddly impressed with them, as he brewed some water.

"I'll make some tea. I have some tea leaves. Would you like to try them?" he offered.

"Oh, thank you, Leo," Riselia replied.

Mana filled the stove, and the water soon boiled. Leonis prepared the beverage not with a cheap, flavored and scented substitute, but with real, expensive tea leaves. They'd been a gift from a noble long ago. Leonis had kept them safe in the Realm of Shadows' treasure vault. Shary had handpicked the ones he was using today, so there was no doubting their quality.

I had an undead body at the time, so I had no use for these previously…

The gentle din of rain reached Leonis's ears. Looking out the window, he saw a light shower had started.

"They say the weather should clear up on the day of the Holy Light Festival," Regina commented.

"Oh, thank goodness. It's hard to set my hair on rainy days…," Riselia said.

“I’ll do it for you,” Regina told her reassuringly.

“Hmm, excuse me, but how do you know the weather two days from now?” Leonis asked, setting the leaves into the tea strainer.

“The academy’s administration bureau gathers Holy Sword wielders with future sight. Usually, they’re tasked with scouting out Void nests. But since their abilities need practice to develop, they’re also used to forecast the upcoming weather.”

“Future sight…,” Leonis muttered pensively. “There really are all kinds of Holy Swords, aren’t there?”

Immediately, a doubt sprouted in the Undead King’s mind.

“Couldn’t that future sight have foreseen matters like the Void Stampede or the incident on the *Hyperion*?”

“Apparently, seeing the future is a very abstract power,” Riselia answered. “It’s only by matching those predictions with data collected from analysis-type Holy Swords, like Miss Finé’s Eye of the Witch, that the Assault Garden can read what’s to come in any meaningful capacity.”

“And there are people in the military who remain skeptical of foretold events,” Regina appended.

I see. So it’s like star reading. Leonis quickly lost interest. It was no comparison to the future sight afforded to the goddess Roselia by virtue of her authority.

“Still, I really hope things clear up in time for the celebration,” Riselia stated.

“Me too,” Leonis responded. In truth, though, he didn’t care one bit for the weather. When he was the Undead King, he always stayed inside Necrozoa’s Death Hold. Plus, all it took to manipulate a battlefield’s atmospheric conditions was an eighth-order spell.

Speaking of, that one always did appear with a great storm in their wake.

Leonis thought back to the past with a hint of sweet nostalgia. In his era, there’d been another Dark Lord who’d stood equal with him; a creature hailed as the ruler of storms—Veira, the Dragon Lord.

It was always quite obvious whenever Veira descended upon the battlefield…

Feeling his lips soften into a smile, Leonis took a sip of his tea. A soothing aroma tickled his nostrils. Just as the steam clouded over the windowpane, Leonis noticed a familiar figure approach. A platinum-blond girl, accompanied by two ice wolves.

◆

“Listen carefully! I come with a notification from the executive committee!”

Standing in front of the Hræsvelgr dorm’s entranceway, Fenris Edelritz brushed back her platinum-blond hair.

“Now, now, Lady Selia,” Regina soothed, calming Riselia first before addressing their guest. “Why don’t you come inside for some tea, Lady Fenris?”

“…No, thank you. Your offer is appreciated, though,” Fenris politely refused before thrusting a slip of paper in front of Riselia.

“A submission form for the Holy Light Festival?” As she beheld the sheet, Riselia blinked in befuddlement.

“Indeed. I see the eighteenth platoon intends on holding a café, like last year?” questioned Fenris.

“Y-yes, we are… Is there a problem—?”

“There is a major problem! You there, boy…” Fenris pointed sternly at Leonis, who was seated behind Riselia.

“What about Leo?” Riselia asked.

“He’s going to be serving customers in the café as well, yes?”

“W-well, yes…”

“You are aware, I believe, that this is a girls’ dorm? Since he’s still young, he was given special permission to stay here by his designated guardian.”

“Th-that’s right, but—” Riselia started to stammer out an excuse, but Fenris continued to interrupt.

“During the Holy Light Festival, many outsiders will be visiting the academy. And the executive committee must maintain appearances. We can’t let anyone think we do not uphold public morals on the Seventh Assault Garden.”

“Th-that’s… Well…” Faced with this reasoning, Riselia was at a loss for words. Indeed, Leonis living in the same dorm as her was a unique situation.

“As such, the executive committee cannot and will not approve of this child working in customer service,” Fenris stated firmly, placing her hands on her hips.

“…Well, if you say so, I guess we’ll have to defer to your decision,” Leonis conceded, shrugging.

“Leo?!” Riselia looked at him, shocked.

“I’ll just spend the festival working behind the scenes, in the kitchen,” the boy stated.

“Yes, that would certainly be acceptable,” Fenris approved, satisfied. “Believe me when I say that I did not do this out of ill will.”

“I understand. I wouldn’t want to cause trouble for the academy, either,” Leonis replied.

“…It’s a shame, but I guess there’s no other option.” Riselia hung her head, disappointed.

Leonis hadn’t wanted to draw attention to himself, so as far as he was concerned, this was a fortunate turn of events.

However, just as Leonis tried to hide his relief, Regina flashed an impish smile.

“…Miss Regina?” Leonis asked, brow furrowed with suspicion.

“Oh, nothing. Don’t mind me, kid.” Regina evaded the inquiry, merely beaming.

◆

How in the world did things come to this?

In the center of a forest was a run-down, dilapidated structure. And lying on a bed in one of its rooms was Arle Kirlesio, heaving a confused sigh. A dark elf girl named Lena had rescued her from trouble with Holy Swordsmen in the city.

Lena had kindly shared food with Arle, who was on the verge of collapsing from hunger, and even set her up with shelter. The dark elves were once subordinates of the Dark Lords’ Armies and mortal enemies of the elves. Yet it seemed that after a thousand years, that divide had closed. Even Arle herself didn’t feel any need to resent a dark elf at this point. However…

I didn’t think she was the leader of a criminal organization.

Arle was currently in a hideout belonging to the Demon Wolf Pack, a demi-human criminal organization. They presented themselves as a resistance movement but were actually a half-baked excuse of an armed terrorist group.

I should probably break away from them soon before things take a turn for the worse…

Unfortunately, there was a reason Arle had to remain for a while yet. She’d learned the name of the figure behind this group: Zol Vadis.

It was the moniker of an ancient Dark Lord who had reigned over the world before the Eight Dark Lords rose to power. Never had Arle imagined she’d hear that name in an age when the war between the Six Heroes and the Eight Dark Lords was forgotten.

I find it hard to believe the real Zol Vadis has resurrected, but…

If the name of such a wicked creature was floating around, Arle had to look into it. Heroes were those charged with striking down Dark Lords. That was why she’d been granted one of the Arc Seven, the Demon Smiting Sword, Crozax.

Arle thought that if she could gain this organization’s trust, she might get a chance to meet this Zol Vadis. To do that, she would need to prove herself, however.

“Arle, I’m coming in.” The curtain hanging over the door shifted, revealing a petite girl, her dark eyes sagacious and penetrating. This was Lena.

“What?” Arle asked her.

“You said you’re confident in your sword skills, right?”

“…I suppose.”

“Then let’s go ahead and put that boast to the test, shall we?” Lena said with a confident look.

◆

After Fenris's visit, Leonis returned to his room and set up an isolation barrier around its perimeter. With this field in place, no one could enter the room, and no sound would leak out. Leonis turned on the lights, casting shadows in the room.

"Blackas, Shary. Come forth."

He invoked the names of his friend and his subordinate.

"I come in accordance to your summons, my lord," Shary stated, appearing on one knee. Immediately after the girl's arrival, a pitch-black wolf arrived from the dark.

"You called, my friend?"

"Oh, Blackas, ther— Mm?!" Leonis suddenly exclaimed.

The prince of the Realm of Shadows…had his black fur combed down. It was exceptionally sleek and shiny.

"Wh-why do you look like that?!"

"I surrendered myself to the care of a professional called a trimmer," Blackas explained.

"A…trimmer?"

The ebon wolf shook his head, and the floral scent of shampoo rose from his jet-black fur.

"That swordswoman helped introduce me."

"You mean Sakuya."

Apparently, the executive committee was trying to round up the strays strolling around the academy in preparation for the school festival. Leonis had to admit that having a wolf go about the campus freely was a bit much.

"That girl saw me toying with those people and escorted me to a popular beautician."

Rustle. Rustle, rustle.

"…I think I understand the gist of what happened," Leonis replied, regarding his friend with half-lidded eyes. "Do you like the way your fur feels now?"

"It keeps humans from pursuing me on sight, at least." Blackas shook his head, once again unleashing a puff of some flowery scent into the air.

Indeed, between his cut-and-combed fur and the ribbon Sakuya had tied to him a while back, one wouldn't mistake him for a wild beast.

"…I suppose I can't complain so long as you're satisfied with it."

Blackas Shadow Prince was once known as the rampaging emperor of the Realm of Shadows. He was royalty and usually demanded more respect, but if Blackas himself was satisfied with this, Leonis wasn't going to dwell on it.

"Shary, you mentioned a report?" Leonis questioned to move things along.

"Yes." The assassin maid nodded respectfully. "I discovered traces of suspicious activity in the shadow corridors."

“What?” This caught Leonis’s attention.

The shadow corridors were a type of magic formed by the secret knowledge of the Realm of Shadows.

“The one set up along the city’s coastal area is beginning to tear apart,” Shary detailed.

“Hmm. Isn’t it possible the city’s apparatuses are interfering with it?” Leonis suggested.

This Assault Garden used an assortment of cutting-edge magical technology. Since the shadow corridors were a magical construct, too, albeit of a different sort, it was possible they were being influenced.

“That is possible, yes,” Shary acknowledged. “I’ve repaired the damage but thought I should report it either way.”

Shary wasn’t capable of observing every single person who used the shadow corridors. The man who appeared in the Third Assault Garden came to mind as a possible culprit.

“Understood. Stay vigilant,” Leonis instructed.

“Yes, my lord.” Shary bowed her head and then added timidly. “…Um…”

“What is it? Is there anything else?”

“Y-yes… I have, um, procured some baked sweets. Would you mind trying them?”

Shary produced a plate with a pile of cookies on it from the shadows.

“Oh, that is some admirable dedication on your behalf.” Leonis nodded, satisfied. “I’ll try them.”

“Y-yes. They may not suit your palate, but…”

Leonis took a cookie and bit down on it.

“Ngh! Kah, kah, kah! W-water…!”

“A-are you all right, my lord?!”

All the moisture in his throat suddenly vanished, and the cookie clogged his windpipe. The treat was terribly briny. Someone had kneaded salt into it.

“M-my apologies!”

“*Hack! Horf!* I-it’s fine. It simply caught me by surprise,” Leonis generously assured, even as he was still coughing.

“I-I’ll make them better next time, so you can throw those away…,” the ebon maid muttered dejectedly, slowly sinking back into the shadows in a forlorn manner.

“…Shary?” After a moment of thought, Leonis took another cookie off the plate. It tasted just as nasty and was crumbling from the inside, too.

“Are you going to eat those, Lord Magnus?” Blackas asked.

“She went to the trouble of making them for me,” responded Leonis as he reached for another cookie. “I have to.”

◆

Come nightfall, Leonis was revising his notes for the next day's lectures.

"Leo, are you still up?"

"Hard worker, aren't you, kid?"

Riselia entered his room, clad in pajamas and cradling a pillow for whatever reason. She must have just taken a shower, because faint steam rose from her damp locks. Regina was standing behind her, dressed similarly and carrying a pillow of her own.

"Hello, Miss Selia," Leonis said, closing his book with a hint of suspicion. "Are the outfits going to be ready on time?"

"Oh, yes, they should be done tomorrow at this rate." Riselia nodded.

"Heh-heh. You'll have to wait for the day of the event for the grand unveiling," Regina added teasingly.

"I-I'm not that curious about them," Leonis replied, averting his gaze. "By the way, why do you have those pillows?"

It had been on his mind since the girls had come in.

"Oh, this? It's a feather pillow," Riselia replied. "It's really fluffy and comfortable to sleep on."

She beat the object a couple of times, as if to illustrate.

"My pillow has buckwheat chaff," Regina appended.

"No, I mean, why did you bring them here?" Leonis corrected the question.

The two girls gazed at each other, puzzled.

"Well, we figured we could sleep in your room tonight, Leo," Riselia stated bluntly.

"…?!" Leonis went wide-eyed. "Wh-what do you mean?!"

"The rooms downstairs are all full of stage settings for the Holy Light Festival," Regina answered with a shrug.

During the celebration, the Hræsvelgr dorm's ground floor was contracted yearly to serve as a storehouse for various clubs' equipment. It was a condition for the eighteenth platoon living here, so they weren't in any position to protest.

"So during the Holy Light Festival, Sakuya always stays with Miss Finé, and I used to sleep in Lady Selia's room," explained Regina.

"But my place is full of tools for decorating the café. It's so packed I don't have anywhere to sleep, so that just leaves your room, Leo," Riselia said, bringing her hands together apologetically.

"I…see…"

Leonis couldn't refuse when she worded it like that. After all, he was staying at what had initially been Riselia's study.

"We're having a pajama party tonight, Lady Selia," Regina declared cheerfully.

“Yep, we used to sleep in the same bed a lot back at the Crystalia Estate.” Riselia nodded in agreement.

“Heh-heh. You were always a scaredy-cat back then.”

“I—I wasn’t scared…”

The young lady and her maid chatted cheerfully, hugging their pillows.

“W-wait! I don’t mind you two sleeping in my room, but…” Leonis cleared his throat. “I think I’ll spend the night on the living room sofa.”

Back when he was undead, Leonis rested in a stone coffin. Compared to that, even a couch was an improvement. In fact, Leonis was confident he could even sleep comfortably inside a musical instrument case.

However…

“No.” Riselia shook her head. “You can’t do that, Leo. You’ll catch a cold.”

“A cold? I won’t…,” Leonis began to object but stopped.

He couldn’t confidently claim he wouldn’t get sick. He’d gone to sleep without drying his hair not too long ago and woke up coughing. Riselia had to nurse him back to health. That occasion made it painfully clear just how frail his human body really was.

“If anyone has to lay on the sofa, it’ll be me,” Riselia told him firmly.

“…Fine. I’ll sleep in my bed,” Leonis surrendered.

Riselia had a way of being very stubborn when she got protective. There was no reasoning with her.

“Your hair’s pretty frizzy, isn’t it, kid?” Regina remarked, grabbing Leonis like she had her pillow.

“M-Miss Regina?!”

Her pigtailed hair brushed against his cheeks, and the scent of her soap filled his nose. Through the fabric of her pajamas, he could feel her breasts pressing against him without a bra to contain them.

“You can’t hog Leo like that, Regina,” Riselia loudly protested, pouting while sitting at the edge of the bed.

“All right, all right,” Regina responded with a sarcastic smile, releasing Leonis’s body and moving over to the opposite end of the bed where Riselia was perched.

Leonis was left with no option but to sandwich himself between the two girls.

“M-Miss Selia, don’t cling to me like that…” Leonis’s cheeks were flushing red, but Riselia didn’t seem to notice.

“By the way, Leo, is there anywhere you’d like to go?” she asked.

“Somewhere I’d like to go…?” parroted Leonis, not entirely understanding what she meant.

“It’s not like we have the Holy Light Festival every day, so you should enjoy it, too, kid,” Riselia explained, gently tapping a finger on his head.

“Oh, right…”

Going around and enjoying the festivities didn’t sound like a bad idea, but Leonis’s true interests resided with the Sixth Assault Garden, which the

Seventh was set to couple with at the climax of the celebration. The other floating city would fall under the Dark Lords' Armies' control eventually, so scouting it out early was ideal. There was also the matter of the Origin Spirit the Demon Wolf Pack had mentioned.

“I’d prefer to tour the Sixth Assault Garden over the festival, actually,” admitted Leonis.

“Makes sense. It’s not often we get to link up with other cities,” Regina replied in agreement.

“The Sixth Assault Garden has a famous museum, too,” Riselia appended.

“A museum?”

“Yes, it’s got relics collected from ruins around the world on display. One of the empire’s leading research institutes is stationed near it, and they display the results of their efforts to the public there.”

Oh…

That sounded like helpful information. The place could provide Leonis with useful information about the state of the world.

“Still, I’m a bit anxious about letting you go alone…,” Riselia said, placing a finger on her chin. “I’d rather show you around…”

Her doting streak was already reemerging.

“Ah, we’ll probably be pretty busy in the morning,” Regina pointed out. “But once the public matches begin, business in the café should slow down.”

“Really? Then I’ll escort you on your museum trip, Leo,” Riselia concluded.

“I really can go alone…,” the Undead King weakly asserted.

“Nooooope. What if some stranger kidnaps you?” Riselia scolded, poking him gently on the forehead with her index finger.

◆

In the dead of night, a petite girl trekked through the extensive woods behind the Hræsvelgr dorm, insects chirping all around her. This forest was once used as an arena for combat practice, but when the training field capable of altering its terrain was completed, it mostly became a place where students could relax.

At least, that’s what it was used for in the day. As well maintained as the trees and shrubs were, most didn’t venture into the woods after dark.

The girl sprinted along without anything to light her way, treading upon earth damp with evening dew. Scant rays of moonlight cast her Sakura Orchid attire in a pale glow.

Upon reaching a clearing in the forest, Sakuya stopped.

<You have…cut down the Voids…Your Highness.>

“Yes. How many of them were there…? I can’t remember. I was quite absorbed in it…”

She’d slain countless Voids on the Third Assault Garden. In fact, she’d likely broken her previous record, though that held little meaning to Sakuya.

<Your skill with a sword is impressive. Given time, you may even overcome Setsura.>

<…But this isn't enough to slay our sworn enemies…>

<…You must cut down…the Voids…>

The voices bellowed around her eerily, like the chanting of a curse.

"Yes. I know," Sakuya replied quietly.

On moonlit nights, the vengeful spirits etched into Sakuya's flesh grew restless. The malevolent ghosts of her people had called to Sakuya in her mind since the day her homeland had fallen to ruin.

A cold sweat surfaced on the young woman's forehead. She focused on a spot between her eyes, whetting her consciousness until the voices petered out.

Yes… I will take revenge on that Void.

Shardark Void Lord, a Void in the form of a one-eyed swordsman, had taken Sakuya's sister's life.

Even now, her countless comrades from the Sakura Orchid fought as she did. They all dreamed of the day a Holy Sword harboring the will of their home would claim that Void Lord's head.

Suddenly, there came sneering from the dark.

"Geh-eh-eh… You give off a demonic scent, lass…"

"Who's there?!" Sakuya demanded, scanning her surroundings.

"You are not the vampire we seek, but you're quite the interesting find in your own right…," the new voices continued.

"Some manner of phantom?" Sakuya muttered to herself, a sharp glow in her gaze. She looked up with a start, where she saw a set of gleaming red compound eyes peering down at her. They belonged to a writhing, cackling, gigantic spider monster.

◆

"Mmm… Haa… Mha… ♪ "

"…!"

Feeling the nibbling on his earlobe, Leonis grimaced as sweet pain shot through his body.

I can't sleep like this!

Opening his eyes and turning over in his bed, he found himself faced with Riselia, who was fast asleep and appeared very satisfied. While awake, she'd act modest and reserved, only drinking from him when given permission. When she was unconscious, however, the vampiric impulses her mind kept at bay surfaced.

Not that I particularly mind letting her suck my blood, Leonis thought with a sigh. He was responsible for her being a vampire, after all. Supplying his minion with what she needed to survive was his duty as her master. The only trouble was: It hurt.

When Riselia partook of his blood while awake, she nibbled gently. The same could not be said for when she was slumbering. Leonis sat up gently,

making sure not to wake the girls. As Riselia pecked at the air, biting down on nothing at all, he stuck out his index finger in front of her lips.

“Mm… Schlrp… Nha…”

Riselia ran her tongue over his digit for a moment and then bit down on it. Having her gnaw on his finger hurt as well, but it was preferable to his earlobe aching.

“Mm… Rio… Schlrp… Mhaaa…”

The sight of his minion wholeheartedly sucking on his finger was a bit heartwarming.

Have your fill of this Dark Lord’s mana…, Leonis mused.

“…Mm! ♪ ”

Suddenly, a new pain rushed through his other arm, which he’d been propping himself up with.

“…Miss Regina?!” gasped Leonis, nearly raising his voice.

“Mm, tasty, mm, mha…”

“…”

The blond-haired girl chomped down on his free arm. Evidently, she just had a random tendency to bite in her sleep.

“I’m not a piece of ham, you know,” Leonis whispered with a hint of annoyance, shoving a pillow into her mouth.

“Mm, nnm…” Regina started nibbling on it instead.

Tomorrow I’ll be sleeping on the sofa, he decided.

Ting!

Leonis heard the faint sound of clashing swords from beyond the window.

What was that?

Leonis got to his feet quietly and approached the pane. Through it, he saw what looked like a flash of lightning through the broadleaf trees.

◆

Sakuya raised her voice in a battle cry as she swung her sword. “Lightning Fire Slash!”

A blade crackling with electricity cleaved through the darkness. It was an earnest, lethal cut, wholly unlike the way Sakuya wielded her weapon during practice matches. Yet, it surprisingly failed to strike true.

It avoided Raikirimaru’s first slash?!

Swiftly fixing her posture, Sakuya leaned against one of the trees as she hurriedly searched for her opponent.

Is this a Void? she wondered, but the young woman quickly dismissed that notion. It wasn’t likely the administrative bureau would allow a Void to slip this deep into the academy’s premises. If that was the case, then what was this creature?

“…Quite skilled, aren’t you? Geh-eh-eh…” Its cackling echoed through the forest.

“So you speak human words, monster…,” Sakuya muttered to herself.

The next moment, the trees lined next to her were all silently cut down at once. Kicking off the ground, she charged forward. Writhing, whiplike appendages slashed through the brush in pursuit.

Thunderclap!

Sakuya jumped into the trees with her body enveloped in lightning. Her Holy Sword, Raikirimaru, was best suited to these sorts of cluttered, uneven terrains.

Never underestimate a Sakura Orchid swordswoman!

Pushing against a tree trunk, Sakuya swiftly changed direction and cut down one of the creature's limbs. The appendage fell limply to the ground and soundlessly melted into the shadows cast on the forest floor by the moonlight.

It didn't feel like I actually touched anything. Does this beast have no physical form?

After landing, Sakuya sliced through another extremity that lanced toward her from the dark.

"Geh-eh-eh… This is a Holy Sword, yes? Quite the mysterious power. It's impressive that it can cut through our shadows."

"Chattering in the heat of battle. You're quite the confident one."

Coating herself in lightning, Sakuya leaped forth. Using the direction of her opponent's attacks as a reference, she discerned its location.

"Ultimate Blade Technique—Thundering Lightning Slash!"

This was a lethal single-target sword technique enabled by the acceleration from Thunderclap. Multiple slashes intersected, converging on a single point in the darkness.

Got it!

Yet the moment Sakuya was confident she'd hit her opponent, she heard a voice from above.

"Impressive power. For a human."

"…?!"

A set of crimson eyes were watching Sakuya from the treetops. If her target was above, then what had she attacked? The lump of darkness she had cut sloshed and coiled around Raikirimaru like elastic tar.

"…Kuh… Let go…!" Sakuya growled.

"Geh-eh-eh… Be consumed by…your own shadow….!"

A human-shaped mass of ebon emerged, as if to swallow Sakuya up. Before it had the chance, however…

"Zol Meides!"

Boooooooooooooom!

Black flames suddenly burst to life out of thin air, annihilating the shadow.

"What?!" the monster cried in surprise.

Sakuya was sitting on the ground with a stupefied expression. A set of footsteps was growing louder behind her.

"Are you all right, Sakuya?"

“Kid…”

Leonis stepped into the moonlight, still wearing his pajamas.

◆

I knew it. That light was Sakuya’s lightning sword.

Leonis approached Sakuya slowly, extending a hand to her. He’d been led here by the flashes in the night.

“Can you stand?” he asked.

“Y-yeah…” The blue-haired girl nodded, rising to her feet.

Leonis was relieved to see that Sakuya didn’t have any injuries, save for a few scrapes and scratches.

I can’t use healing magic, after all.

“What are you doing here, boy?”

“I was having trouble sleeping. But that’s not important right now.” Leonis looked up to the treetops, where the creature was perched. “What is that?”

The thing sported glimmering red eyes and a swollen abdomen from which extended several squirming limbs.

You look down upon the strongest of Dark Lords so brazenly… You have some nerve. Leonis tapped the bottom of the Staff of Sealed Sins against the ground.

“I don’t know. It attacked me all of a sudden…” Sakuya shook her head, fixing her grip on Raikirimaru.

“It’s not a Void?” Leonis questioned.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Was that…sorcery…?!” the monster inquired in disbelief. “Have the humans of this age not…lost the ability to wield it…?”

This thing knows about sorcery…? Leonis furrowed his brow.

“No… Perhaps a vampire’s minion might be able to…,” the creature reasoned to itself aloud.

“Who are you calling a minion—? Wait.” Leonis went silent when he realized that the monster spoke of a vampire. Did it know about Riselia?

“Geh-eh-eh… It seems you know of her…” The shadowy thing laughed.

The next moment, its arms extended toward Leonis.

“Get behind me, kid!” Sakuya stepped in front of Leonis, slashing away the incoming attacks. The electrical discharges released by her Holy Sword flashed in the dark woods.

“This is a challenging opponent,” Sakuya admitted. “Can you cover for me?”

“Of course,” Leonis stated, standing back-to-back with the girl, his staff in hand.

Sakuya often assumed this formation with Riselia when training.

“Impudent humans…!”

The monster blitzed through the air. Dropping downward, the shadow creature loosed a flurry of blows at Sakuya.

“Second-order spell—Lanche Vero!” Leonis chanted as he sprinted between the trees.

A torrent of black spears erupted from the tip of the Staff of Sealed Sins, intercepting the monster. Using the opening Leonis created for her, Sakuya jumped into the woods, disappearing.

Despite its large size, the shadow creature swiftly leaped to a treetop. As Leonis gave chase, mud splashed over his pajama bottoms. Riselia was going to scold him for that later.

Curse you…

Filling with anger, Leonis aimed a Gravity Bullet spell at the monster. It sped toward its target, ripping apart the trees in its way. However, the air around the monster was enveloped in a bright-white light, which destroyed Leonis’s spell.

That was sorcery. Is this a demon?

Demons were beings that differed slightly from most monsters. They took on many varied forms, and their powers were just as inconsistent. They all shared a few commonalities, though. Each was more powerful than a common monster and highly intelligent.

And this looks to be a fairly powerful one, at that.

Of course, to a Dark Lord like Leonis, demons weren’t even worthy of his attention. A fifth-order (or higher) spell could destroy it in one hit. Doing that would expose the extent of his power to Sakuya, though. What’s more, it could have come here through the shadow corridors, as Shary had reported.

Leonis needed to capture this creature, ensorcell it with a domination spell, and get it to talk.

The spider demon’s red eyes glinted ominously. “Geh-eh-eh… Shadow Bind Barrier!”

A shining, malevolent magic circle appeared over the area.

A barrier spell?!

Leonis jumped into the air. The ground directly beneath him was consumed by darkness, and the surrounding trees sunk into the gap.

“Shray Zast!” Leonis fired another flurry of spells.

Unfortunately, the spider demon proved nimble, skittering about to evade his shots.

“Miss Sakuya!”

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Sakuya let out a battle cry, her blade flashing with electricity.

Moving through the woods at high speed, she closed in on their opponent from the flank. The creature hurriedly produced another appendage to stop her, but…

“Too slow!” Sakuya swung down her Holy Sword.

“Her movements…are quicker…?!” the spider demon exclaimed.

“My Raikirimaru is a sword of acceleration,” Sakuya stated coldly. “The more I swing it, the faster I become. Ultimate Blade Technique—Lightning Flash!”

Whoosh!

Sakuya’s blade bit into the spider demon’s abdomen. The monstrous thing let out a screech of agony that tore through the still silence of the night.

Striking a demon is an impressive feat. From Leonis’s estimate, their opponent was fairly skilled. It seemed Sakuya held back during training quite a bit. Despite her best effort, the cut hadn’t been fatal, however.

“Gaaaaaaaaaah! How dare you hurt me, you lowly human!”

The spider demon tried to chant some kind of spell, but the magic immediately dispersed.

“…It can’t be!” the creature howled. “Incantation disruption?!”

That was Leonis’s doing. Incantation disruption was a highly advanced technique, but it was child’s play for a Dark Lord who had mastered all sorcery had to offer.

“Hyaaaaaah! Thundering Lightning Slash!”

Riiiiiiiiiiip!

Sakuya’s blade gouged into the spider demon’s abdomen. The creature fell to the ground and began sinking into the shadows.

No, we can’t let it get away…!

He still needed to get information out of it. Holding up his staff, he began chanting a spell…when the spider demon suddenly turned still. A silvery knife knit the demon’s shadow into place.

“…What?!”

And as the spiderlike creature froze in place…

“Haaaaaaaaaah!” Sakuya drove her Holy Sword into the glittering red compound eyes.

“Curse you… Curse you, curse youuuuuu!”

The demon’s tendril-like appendages coiled around Sakuya’s arms as it let out an agonized howl. Its abdomen swelled, turning red-hot like a furnace.

This is bad!

Understanding the spider demon’s intentions, Leonis chanted an eighth-order spell.

“Vorzaid!”

Darkness enveloped the demon’s massive form just as it was about to explode, completely destroying it. Silence settled over the woods at once. Sakuya lowered Raikirimaru’s blade.

“Miss Sakuya… Are you all right?” Leonis asked her.

“Y-yes…,” Sakuya muttered as her Holy Sword faded away into particles of light. “What was that monster…?”

Leonis regarded the young woman seriously. “Have you ever seen anything like it before?”

Sakuya shook her head. “For now, let’s report this to the administrative bureau. By the way, kid…” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Yes?”

“Why are you hiding your true power?”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Leonis stammered, feigning ignorance.

Thankfully, Sakuya didn’t pursue the inquiry any further. “No, forgive me. I’m sure you have your reasons,” she said with a shrug. Then she began walking back in the direction of the dorm.

◆

“It’s hard to see where we’re walking, kid, so be careful.”

“Okay…”

Leonis and Sakuya trekked through the dense woods, with Leonis walking a short distance behind Sakuya. As he looked up at the trees, he called out to Shary telepathically.

“I am here, my lord…,” she replied to him at once.

It was she who stitched the demon’s shadow in place earlier. She was guarding over Leonis while keeping herself out of sight.

“My apologies. I didn’t imagine it might attempt to self-destruct…,” Shary expressed with regret.

“It’s fine. You’re not at fault for that. What did you make of that beast?” Leonis asked his maid.

“It was a demon, for sure. A high-ranking one.”

“Do you have any idea what its objective was?”

“All I have is a conjecture, but…”

“Feel free to share,” Leonis urged.

“I believe this creature was of the same profession as myself.”

“A demon assassin…”

During his era, Leonis’s enemies hadn’t simply been heroes and warriors. Many factions had sent covert killers to take the life of the Undead King. Curiously, it didn’t seem like this spider demon had come for him. It was shocked at the sight of him using sorcery, making it seem unlikely that Leonis’s identity had been exposed.

It mentioned a vampire. Was it after Riselia?

If that was true, then Leonis couldn’t even begin to guess what the demon wanted with her. It was all too inexplicable…

“My lord, I have more…,” Shary added.

“What is it?”

“I believe that demon was the one who interfered with the shadow corridor, but there is trace evidence that several other spots were attacked…”

“…So more than one demon has infiltrated this city.”

“So it seems, my lord…”

“And what punishment would you say suits those who would intrude upon a Dark Lord’s kingdom without permission?” Leonis inquired.

“A swift death would do, in my humble opinion,” Shary responded.

“Hmm. Indeed…”

And since they made an attempt on his favored minion’s life, they must be punished all the more.

“Shary, probe for the enemy’s identity,” Leonis ordered.

“By your will, my lord,” Shary replied, and she disappeared into the darkness.

A sneer twisted Leonis’s face. You will rue the day you thought you could claim that which belongs to a Dark Lord, you fools.

CHAPTER 4
THE HOLY LIGHT FESTIVAL

Two days had passed since the demon attack. The Holy Light Festival had arrived. As Riselia had hoped, the sky was bright and the weather was clear. The sun shone warmly upon the academy's flagstones.

"Mm, looking good! The place has just the right atmosphere!"

Riselia gave a satisfied nod, glancing around the meeting room on the first floor. It had been transformed with decorations for the café and was completely unrecognizable. While the Hræsvelgr dorm's exterior had been left unaltered—aged and dignified—the girls had done a splendid job remodeling the interior.

All the wallpaper had been changed, lending them the appearance of an eerie painting. Little bells shaped like skulls and bats hung from the ceiling. Three skeletons adorned the building's entrance.

"It's like a real vampire mansion. It's kind of relaxing," Riselia remarked.

"Actual vampire abodes are no different from regular aristocrat estates," Leonis, who once had vampires serving under him, corrected. "They were all quite gloomy places."

Still, he couldn't deny that this place was well suited to the undead, though.

Hmm. This atmosphere is indeed relaxing. It reminds me of the underground mausoleum.

The illumination was just right, too. Leonis wouldn't have minded leaving the dorm this way permanently.

"It's a good thing it's bright out today. Though, it kind of clashes with the café's mood…," Regina muttered, looking out the window.

"The contrast kind of adds to the fun, doesn't it?" Riselia responded, a strained smile on her lips.

Outside, a murder of crows was roosting on a nearby tree, likely lured by Riselia's vampiric power.

"It's about time we change into our costumes and get ready," Elfiné decided, clapping her hands to gather everyone's attention.

"Oh, right!" Riselia exclaimed.

Leaving Leonis behind, the girls filed into Elfiné's room, which had been designated as their dressing booth.

◆

While Riselia and the other girls were changing into their costumes, Leonis went to the kitchen to brew coffee and took a seat at one of the café's tables. During his era, he'd never thought something like coffee would exist.

It was as if the darkness of the blackest pitch had been concentrated into a beverage. A perfect drink to fit a Dark Lord's image if there ever was one. If it weren't so bitter, it would have been flawless.

That aside…, Leonis pondered as he added plenty of sugar to the cup and stirred it.

For the time being, there were no further signs of the demon assassins. Was there only one after all, or were they perhaps biding their time, lying in wait for the proper chance?

Leonis was keeping a watchful eye on Riselia, too, but it didn't seem like anyone who might try to abduct her had made contact with her. A few students approached the young woman, trying to hit on her, but Leonis cast a Death Delusion on them, which left them crippled with terror for several days.

Leonis may have been the most forgiving of the Dark Lords, but even he knew to answer an attempt to lay hands on his favored minion with bitter punishment.

Either way, I will have to remain vigilant for a while longer.

"—We're ready, Leo. ♪ "

It was then that the door to the dressing room opened. In came Riselia, dressed in her café outfit.

"…M-Miss Selia?!" Leonis very nearly spat out his coffee, his cheeks turning red.

The silver-haired young woman was dressed in a sleek, glossy enamel leather outfit. It showed off a generous amount of cleavage and revealed her thighs seductively. There were two small bat wings attached to the outfit's back. It was attire styled in the image of a vampire.

"Heh-heh. You better be a good boy, or the big bad vampire's going to suck your blood," Riselia said with a wink as Leonis stiffened.

She'd probably thought it a playful joke on Leonis that a vampire was dressed up in a vampire-like costume.

No, that's not what a vampire looks like—that's a succubus! Leonis quipped to himself.

True, the two species were similar in appearance, but succubi were a type of demon, not undead. The research materials Riselia had gathered had likely mixed up the two.

"The kid's looking at you with horny eyes, Lady Selia. I told you this was too titillating," Regina remarked from behind Riselia.

"Huh?!" Riselia looked at Leonis with surprise.

"I—I did not!" Leonis hurriedly protested.

"Heh-heh-heh. You sure about that, kid?" Regina questioned.

In contrast to Riselia's alluring outfit, Regina was dressed in a bright-poppy-orange getup. Her hair ribbons had pumpkin designs reminiscent of a monster called a jack-o'-lantern. However, no such creature had ever been a part of the Dark Lords' Armies. As Leonis thought about it, he began to

wonder if jack-o'-lanterns were even real. As far as he could recall, they only ever showed up in books.

As that thought crossed his mind, Leonis's eyes were naturally drawn to Regina's chest, which seemed rather cramped under her blouse buttons.

"What do you think, kid? Does it suit me?" Regina leaned forward with a mischievous grin.

"Y-yes, you look…very cute," Leonis replied honestly, averting his gaze from her bosom.

Hearing this meek praise made a blush creep over Regina's cheeks.

"K-k-kyut…?" She ended up biting on her tongue.

…That's really cute.

"W-well, kid, you've sure learned how to hand out compliments," Regina stuttered bashfully. "At this rate, you're gonna be a Dark Lord in the bedroom when you get older."

Hmm. Is she…? Leonis wondered, realizing something. "Oh, no, you're truly very cute, Regina. You're pretty," he continued, laying on the compliments.

"Y-you shouldn't tease older girls like this, kid!" Regina hurriedly replied.

"Honestly, the ribbons suit you well."

"…Grr, Lady Selia, the kid's bullying me!" Regina cried and hid behind Riselia, her face red down to her neck.

I see. This maid is weak to direct compliments, is she? Leonis's expression turned vicious at discovering this unexpected weakness.

"Wh-what about me, Leo?" Riselia looked at him with a lonely frown.

However, before he could reply…

"M-Miss Finé, I can't! This is too embarrassing!"

"Don't worry; you look great."

Elfiné exited the dressing room, pulling Sakuya by the hand. The former's outfit was an old-style witch costume. She had a pointy round hat and an ebony-colored cloak. Her sleek, black hair was done up, and her mature smile made the girl the very image of a witch.

"You look great, Miss Finé!" Riselia complimented enthusiastically.

"Thank you. You look pretty, too, Selia," Elfiné replied with a smile. "Come on, Sakuya, show yourself to Leo…"

Sakuya was only peeking her head out the door, but Elfiné tugged her into view.

"…Aaah!"

Against her will, she entered stumbling, unintentionally showing herself to everyone.

Oh, this is… Leonis's eyes widened.

The young swordswoman was dressed in a black-and-white gothic Lolita-style long skirt. She had a stylish mini hat and an Alice band on her head that fit her blue hair perfectly.

“…That was awful, Miss Finé,” Sakuya muttered begrudgingly, gripping the hems of her skirt.

She looked completely different from when she slew Voids with Raikirimaru in hand.

“What do you think, Leo?” Elfiné inquired.

“I think she’s adorable.”

“Are you making fun of me, kid?” Sakuya glared at him sullenly.

That sulking expression of hers was lovely in its own way. Leonis looked at the four girls lined up before him. A quartet of beauties dressed in costumes, each charming in her own right. Leonis did not doubt that they would be popular with the customers.

I suppose I’ll be busy today.

Leonis was set to staff the kitchen. Of course, if things turned too hectic, he could summon his Shadow Servants or skeletons to help.

“I’ll go start my preparations, then—,” Leonis said, heading for the kitchen.

But then…

“Oh, wait up, kid,” Regina called while cutting ahead of him.

“…Wh-what is it, Miss Regina?” Leonis asked, a slight sense of dread settling over his heart.

“Hee-hee-hee… Hee-hee…,” Regina chuckled ominously, crossing her arms. “Actually, kid, we prepared one for you, too.”

“…P-prepared what?”

“Well, if you’re going to fit in with the café’s atmosphere, you’re going to need suitable attire.”

“A costume? But I’ll be in the kitchen, out of sight…”

“Right, because we were told that having a boy living in the girls’ dorms looks bad from a public morals’ perspective.”

“Well, yes…”

Suddenly, Regina took out a folded-up bundle of cloth—a frilly dress.

“But if you become a girl, that’s not a problem.”

“W-wait! Stop right there!” Leonis exclaimed. “How did you come to that conclusion?! B-besides, this is all too sudden!”

“I mean, if I’d told you ahead of time, you would have run away.”

“Obviously!”

“Now, put it on. It’s cute!” Regina spread out the ensemble to show him.

It was a dainty maid outfit.

“I made it,” Riselia revealed.

“Miss Selia?!” Leonis looked at her, aghast.

My minion conspired against me?!

“I—I can’t wear this; these are women’s clothes!” Leonis’s honor as a Dark Lord wouldn’t allow it! Glaring at Regina, whose face was twisted in a sinister grin, Leonis took a step back… Only for someone to grab him by the shoulders.

“…Miss Sakuya?!”

“Don’t hold this against me,” she stated solemnly. “I don’t want to be the only one subjected to humiliation here.”

“But you’re a girl!” protested Leonis.

“B-be quiet. I’m taking you down with me, kid!”

Now Sakuya had turned against him. Left with no other recourse, Leonis turned to Elfiné. Surely the ever-responsible oldest girl among the group would come to his aid.

“Hmm… I’m sure you’ll make an adorable girl, Leo,” Elfiné said, bringing her hands together in a show of apology.

In the end, Leonis was powerless to resist.

◆

08:30 Imperial Standard Time.

Excalibur Academy’s gates swung open, and countless citizens poured onto the premises. Even during peacetimes, part of the campus grounds was always accessible to the general populace. The training facilities themselves and the academy’s school buildings were typically off-limits. That changed during the Holy Light Festival, however.

Half the visitors to the academy were people from the Sixth Assault Garden, which was currently docked nearby. They mostly came to watch the Holy Sword Blade Dance Festival, a large-scale tournament of mock battles between Holy Swordsmen.

Typically, sparring matches were projected onto large screens across the city, but during the Holy Sword Blade Dance Festival, spectators were allowed to watch from the grounds.

“The afternoon matches are especially popular, because that’s when high-ranked platoons participate. So we should have less traffic then,” Riselia explained.

“…Understood. I only need to put up with this until then.”

“Hmm, are you angry, Leo?”

“No,” Leonis replied sullenly, gripping the hem of his skirt.

The boy was clad in a classic maid’s uniform. He had a black wig with an Alice band on his head. His outfit was modeled after the ghost girl said to appear randomly in this dorm.

“You’re so cute, kid! I knew it would fit you like a glove!” Regina declared, having returned from taking orders at a few of the tables in their café.

Perhaps this was her way of getting back at him for flustering her earlier.

…I-I’ll remember this, woman! Leonis gritted his teeth, a shameful blush on his cheeks.

“Look at that maid! She’s so adorable!” one female student in the café whispered.

“Yeah, I wish I could take her home!” appended another.

Inconceivable, thought Leonis.

Meanwhile, at a different table…

“Are you ready to place your order?”

“Miss Sakuya, you’re so pretty…”

“Sakuya, you’re a cutie patootie.”

“…Grr, I am not! Hurry up and make your orders!”

Poor Sakuya was being toyed with by her classmates.

◆

Within the thick greenery of the artificial environment’s forest sat a dilapidated building. And in one of the basement rooms of that structure…

“This is the plan,” the dark elf girl Lena whispered. “We use an underground materials transportation route to infiltrate the Sixth Assault Garden’s research institute. After that, Zarik will lead another unit to stage a bombing riot to distract security. Using that opening, we’ll round up the laboratory staff and take them hostage. After that, we’ll make them reveal where they’re holding the Origin Spirit. Simple, right?”

“…Oh. Yeah, it is.”

“It’s bold, but that’s what makes it unexpected.”

The other members of the Demon Wolf Pack nodded, seemingly convinced by Lena’s plan.

Are they complete and utter fools?! This is suicidal! Arle, who was also in attendance, cradled her head in exasperation.

Several swords and guns lay ready on one side of the room.

“I’d like to hear your opinion, rookie,” Lena asked Arle. “Don’t you have any thoughts on the operation?” The dark elf seemed to be fond of Arle, for whatever reason.

“I don’t…think things will go that simply.” Arle shook her head, carefully choosing her words.

Their plan was rash and would almost certainly get them all killed.

“Watch your words, girl!” a lion-headed beastman roared.

“Don’t.” Lena raised a hand, silencing the angered man. “The Dark Lord has ordered us to take the Origin Spirit.”

“Yes. His Greatness said it’s an idea that has merit,” a beastman chimed in.

“And that we are to make sure everything is perfectly prepared…,” added another.

The Dark Lord, huh? Arle mouthed the words bitterly.

She still had her doubts, but apparently, the Zol Vadis who ruled over this organization had created an underground labyrinth using sorcery. What’s more, he’d supposedly destroyed some sort of dragon that had taken up residence in it.

And this Dark Lord approved such a rash plan?

“Can’t this Dark L— Can’t ‘His Greatness’ lend us his power for this task?” Arle inquired, finding a way to voice her doubts.

“His Greatness hasn’t been wholly restored yet,” Lena replied.

“That is why he sent us on this mission.” The werewolf, Zarik, shook his head.

That sounds like useful information.

Had one of the Eight Dark Lords resurrected at full power, they would quickly destroy this human city.

I must purge this menace before they can wreak havoc.

Still, it appeared these demi-humans were all devoted to the Dark Lord. Showing any ill will toward him in this place would put her that much further away from reaching him.

“I have one more question. Assuming we do successfully infiltrate this laboratory place, can we really steal the Origin Spirit?” Arle pressed. As an elf of the forest, the petite woman knew all too well the fury spirits could exhibit. Villages had been razed to the ground for provoking them.

“That should be fine. We can use the Phillet Company’s Artificial Elementals for that.”

“Artificial Elementals?”

“Yes. The witch who gave us the Demon Swords, Sharnak, left this last gift. If we use them to seize the Origin Spirit, it should fall under our control,” Lena detailed, a confident smile on her lips.

A serpent-shaped Artificial Elemental had taken control of the *Hyperion*’s core during the seajacking incident.

“We must act as one and be of aid to His Greatness!”

“We will bring the hammer down on the haughty Human Empire and their Holy Swords!”

The beastmen were raising their voices in bloodthirsty cheering, one after another.

…What is this Dark Lord trying to achieve by taking fools like them under his command?

It seemed that no matter what Arle might say, they were hell-bent on going through with this plundering operation.

I suppose I do owe them for saving my life. If I was to leave them to their fates, it would weigh on my conscience.

Her presence would hopefully ensure no one perished on this fool's errand.

Ugh. What am I even doing here? The elf hero sighed.

◆

"Leo, the table over there ordered a chamomile tea and an apple pie."

"U-understood!"

Leonis moved busily between the tables in his maid uniform.

I swear, why does a Dark Lord have to do this?!

The curious idea of a haunted mansion café, coupled with pretty girls serving the customers in cute outfits, drew quite a few customers. Their exhibit was a roaring success. So much so that they didn't have enough hands to go around during the busiest times, and Leonis had to deploy high-tier skeletons to staff the kitchen.

That said, the peak hour was already behind them.

"…E-excuse me. Is Leo here?" A bashful young girl's voice mentioned Leonis by name.

Turning around, he saw a familiar orphan speaking with Elfiné. She was an adorable girl with her black hair cut to shoulder length—Tessera Lillibel.

"Oh. Are you a friend of Leo's?" Elfiné smiled warmly at her.

"Y-yes…"

"Well, Leo's over there."

"…Huh?" Tessera turned to look at him, her eyes round with surprise.

"L-Leo…?"

"…N-no!" Leonis covered his face with the tray, pretending to be someone else.

"Wh-why are you a girl, Leo?"

She seemed confused.

"It's…a long story…," Leonis admitted, giving up.

"Ah, I… Erm, I understand," Tessera, mature girl that she was, seemed to understand the general situation.

It's a good thing she's quick on the uptake.

"I, erm, I think you look very cute, Leo," Tessera said sheepishly.

"R-really…," Leonis replied vaguely, unable to take the compliment.

"Oh, Tessera, you're here. Go on, take a seat." Riselia returned from the kitchen and urged the girl to one of the available chairs.

"Thanks, Miss Riselia," Tessera replied as she silently settled in a spot next to the window.

"Did you call her, Miss Selia?" Leonis asked.

“Yeah, I sent the older kids in the orphanage tickets for the Holy Sword Dance Festival.” Riselia had a part-time job at Tessera’s orphanage, and she went there a few times every week. Apparently, the children loved her more than the establishment’s manager.

“What about those twins, the tomboy girl and the bespectacled boy? They’re always with her, aren’t they?” Leonis asked.

“Millet and Linze are watching the Holy Sword Dance Festival. I, erm, I came here because I heard you were here, Leo…,” Tessera answered before settling into bashful silence.

Leonis furrowed his brow.

“The eighteenth platoon’s match is tomorrow, so come cheer for us,” Riselia stated.

“Y-yeah! I’ll be there!” Tessera nodded earnestly, clenching her little fists.

“—My. What an interesting concept for a café.”

A familiar voice sounded from the entrance. Fenris Edelritz entered, brushing back her platinum-blond hair.

“What are you doing here, Fenris?” Riselia questioned, glaring at her sullenly.

“What a greeting. I’m merely doing my share of the work for the executive committee. Making the rounds to make sure none of the platoons’ presentations are breaking any rules… W-wait. What is that indecent outfit you’re wearing?!”

Upon noticing Riselia’s costume, Fenris’s face turned red.

“Th-this isn’t indecent! It’s a vampire costume!”

No, it’s a succubus one, Leonis thought.

And it did look quite indecent.

“I—I believe that getup might violate regulations…,” Fenris remarked, taking out a terminal to check the school protocol.

“H-hey—” Riselia raised her voice in protest, but someone cut her off.

“Being a stickler for the rules isn’t a trait you should be flaunting, Miss Fenris. Our role is, all in all, to ensure the citizens enjoy the Holy Light Festival,” said a large man who’d appeared beside Fenris.

“But, Sir Liat…!” protested Fenris.

“My apologies, could you let us rest here for a while, little lady?” the man requested, directing his words at Leonis.

◆

Liat Guinness, also known as Liat the Blazing Lion, was an upperclassman and the vice president of the executive committee, which upheld matters of public order and conduct at Excalibur Academy. The young man possessed a stern face, and his crimson hair was trimmed short. True to his moniker, he had a large build, like a lion’s. He carried himself with a dignity one wouldn’t expect from a seventeen-year-old.

Seeing this hulking young man occupy one of the café's small chairs invoked a certain sense of dissonance.

"Liat is a seasoned warrior who leads Void extermination squads to the front lines. He might even be stronger than me," Sakuya whispered into Leonis's ear as she passed by him.

He'd been dispatched to a mission on the Sixth Assault Garden and had only just recently returned to the academy after a half-year absence.

Yes, he does give the aura of a mighty warrior.

Leonis had to admit that Liat cut an impressive figure. Naturally, he was only strong by human standards, but Leonis did think he was a match for the valiant warriors and knights he fought in the past. Regardless of their position, the Undead King held a positive impression of the strong. As he carried a tray with two teacups to Liat and Fenris's table, he decided he'd treat them to some buttered toast on the house.

"Thank you, dear. It smells lovely," Fenris said in return, elegantly lifting the cup off its saucer. Apparently, she hadn't realized who the maid serving her was.

"I have to say, a haunted mansion is certainly a very unique, interesting idea," Liat commented, taking in the decorations.

"…Still, I can't very well condone that shameless costume," Fenris added with a frown.

"W-well, hmm, that's very, uh…," Liat muttered with an awkward, dry cough.

It was then that Elfiné approached the table. "Hello, Liat. I haven't seen you in a while. I hope you're in good health," she greeted with a friendly tone.

"Oh, Elfiné. I hear you've left the seventh platoon?"

"Yes. I'm part of the eighteenth now."

"I see…"

On his way back to the kitchen, Leonis stopped in his tracks and listened in. Did the two of them know each other?

"I hear you were part of Clauvia's expedition in the Sixth Assault Garden," Elfiné stated.

"…As omniscient as ever, aren't you?" Liat replied with a forced smile.

"Yes. I *am* a witch, after all," Elfiné responded, holding down the brim of her hat with a thin smirk. Suddenly, her expression turned serious. "So what did my dear elder sister dig up in the tundra?"

Liat fell silent for a moment. "That's confidential. But you know that." He shook his head.

An excursion from the Sixth Assault Garden…

Leonis recalled Lena's report; something about an expedition from the Sixth Assault Garden discovering an Origin Spirit.

"I figured. The imperial laboratory's data on the matter had substantial protection placed on it," Elfiné admitted.

“Excuse me, you two, what exactly are you talking about…?” Fenris demanded.

“Since they put Clauvia in charge of this, it isn’t just a ruin excavation,” Elfiné continued, wholly ignoring the inquiry.

“Honestly speaking, I don’t know much, either. I was only there to guard the supply convoy.” Liat shrugged and shook his head. “But I did hear that whatever they excavated was inside a gigantic ice block.”

“And they carried the whole thing, ice block and all, to the Sixth Assault Garden’s laboratory?” Elfiné pressed, cocking an eyebrow.

“That’s right. Honestly, I don’t have the first idea what it might be.”

“I see…” Elfiné bit her lips.

“Leo, can you handle table number three?” Riselia suddenly called out to Leonis.

“Ah yes!” he hurriedly replied.

“Wait… Did she just call that girl Leo?” Fenris glared at him huffily.

Blast! Unfortunately, by the time the thought occurred to him, it was too late. Fenris was gazing fixedly at Leonis’s face.

“…On closer inspection, you’re that child!” she exclaimed.

“Wh-whatever do you mean?!” Leonis stammered.

“You can’t fool Fenris Edelritz’s discerning eye!”

I’ve been fooling your discerning eye the whole time! Leonis quipped to himself.

“Well, if he’s not a boy, there’s no problem with him being in a girls’ dorm, right?” Riselia said, standing between them as if to defend Leonis.

“Th-that’s just sophism!” Fenris retorted.

“But look at how cute he is! He’s a girl now, so it’s all good!” Riselia asserted.

“No, it isn’t!” Leonis snapped.

Ooooooooooooooh!

Thankfully, a loud uproar of applause from the distant training field put the argument to rest.

“I see everyone’s enjoying the Holy Sword Dance Festival,” Liat said with a smile.

Customers were starting to leave their tables.

“Kid.” Regina suddenly tapped on Leonis’s shoulder. “Rush hour’s just about over. You can slip out with Lady Selia.”

“Can you handle the place alone, Regina?” Riselia questioned.

“Yeah.” She nodded confidently. “I want you to enjoy the festivities, Lady Selia.”

“Thank you! Let’s get going, Leo!” Riselia exclaimed, taking Leonis by the hand.

“Ah, wait! I’m not finished with you yet!” Fenris shouted after her.

CHAPTER 5
THE SIXTH ASSAULT GARDEN

Loud cheering erupted from the match grounds. This was when the Holy Sword Dance Festival was at its most exciting. During the morning, the café had been full of customers, but now traffic had died down. Leonis and Riselia were likely already at the Sixth Assault Garden by now.

Elfiné was wiping off one of the tables when her terminal started ringing.

"…What's this?" she said, looking down at the device.

"What's the matter?" Regina inquired as she washed the dishes.

"I got a summons from the administration bureau," Elfiné replied.

"A summons…? Wait, you don't think the Voids appeared, do you?!" Regina asked, her hands stopping.

"Voids?!" Sakuya, who was putting away the knives and forks, reacted immediately.

Elfiné shook her head. "No, it's not an emergency call. It must be something else."

The administration bureau often turned to Holy Swordsmen with powers focused on data analysis, like Elfiné, for help. Holy Swords with such abilities were rare, so regulations stated that they worked under the administration bureau while they served in their assigned platoons.

"Do you mind if I step out for a bit?" Elfiné said apologetically.

"The two of us can handle things just fine; we've got free time right now," Regina answered.

"Thanks. I'll be right back, then."

Still, she couldn't very well go into an office setting dressed as she was. Since the call wasn't urgent, Elfiné thought she had time to change. *Why would they call me in on the day of the Holy Light Festival, though?* the young woman wondered as she entered the dressing room.

Doffing her witch's hat, she brushed her fingers through her hair. Maybe some child had gotten lost, and she'd been called in to look for them? Elfiné had been asked to help with such predicaments before.

Or maybe they found out I've been hacking into the Astral Garden?

Elfiné had used the information management room's terminals to infiltrate the capital's information network more than once. Of course, the young woman was confident she hadn't left behind any evidence, but if her actions were discovered, she'd get much more than a slap on the wrist.

No, that can't be. I used the Eye of the Witch to cloak myself…

She took off her boots and undid her costume's strings along the back. This exposed the mature black brassiere covering her breasts, the dainty curvature of her waist, and her smooth skin, as white as the virgin snow.

I think I've gained a little weight. I'll have to cut back on the sweets, Elfiné thought, pinching what little flesh she had on her flat stomach, when…

"Oh, Finé, so you're old enough now to start caring about those things?"

"…Whoaaaa!" Feeling a gentle caress slither down her back, Elfiné let out a cry of surprise.

"Heh-heh-heh, did I startle you?" someone whispered in her ear. The person snaked their arms from her back to her stomach, pinching and poking. "Hmm. I don't think you have anything to worry about with this little meat on you," they remarked.

"…Nnn, C-Clauvia… What are you doing here?!"

Elfiné wheeled around, glaring into the woman's eyes. She was in her late twenties, clad in a white coat. She had graceful, refined facial features, like one of the capital's famous actresses, with beautiful ebony hair, as if the very darkness of night had been dissolved into her locks.

This was the high-ranking research officer Clauvia Phillet.

Elfiné's elder sister regarded her with a mischievous glance. "Don't make scary faces at me, okay? It'll spoil your pretty face."

"Grr. How did you get in here?" Elfiné scowled at her sibling.

"I've been here for a while. I was one of the café's customers."

"…Huh?"

Clauvia shrugged. "You're aware of my Holy Sword's power, and yet you were clueless the whole time, Finé."

The ability to befuddle other people's perceptions, Elfiné recalled.

In other words, the Holy Sword enabled Clauvia to remove herself from others' consciousness. By the army's estimate, such a power was only at D rank. It wasn't a great Holy Sword for engaging with Voids directly, so Clauvia had become a researcher.

"That witch costume from earlier? Absolutely adorable," Clauvia said mischievously.

"…What do you want?" Elfiné asked with unamused eyes.

"Why, to see my cute little sister, of cou—"

"Stop lying," Elfiné cut her off.

"Huh?!" Clauvia responded with an expression of shock.

The reaction was too exaggerated to be genuine.

“Listen, Clauvia, I’d love to chat, but I received a summons from the administrative bureau, and I need to get going,” Elfiné said.

“Oh, that? That’s from me,” Clauvia stated dismissively.

“…Huh?”

“I hacked into one of the bureau’s terminals and sent you a summons,” Clauvia confessed with a grin. “Their security could use a bit of work.”

The woman stated something quite dangerous with an air of indifference. However, Elfiné knew that her sister could pull a stunt like that with ease.

“Hacking into the administration bureau is a crime, Clauvia.”

“Yes, it is. But”—Clauvia gazed straight into her little sister’s eyes—“with how you’ve been infiltrating the Astral Garden, you’re not one to talk. And using Excalibur Academy’s terminals, at that…”

“…?!”

“Heh-heh-heh. No need to look scared. I’m probably the only one who noticed. And I’d never sell out my precious baby sister, would I?”

“What do you want?” Elfiné questioned with a stiff expression.

“Oh, getting right to the point, are we?” Clauvia whispered with a cynical smirk. “I want you to analyze the relic we brought into the lab with your Holy Sword.”

“You mean that thing the Sixth Assault Garden’s research expedition uncovered in the tundra?”

“That’s right. Honestly, we can’t quite make heads or tails of it.” Clauvia chuckled as she ran a finger along Elfiné’s collarbone. “But I thought that maybe, with your help, we could make a breakthrough.”

“…Is that a threat?”

“No, no. Just asking for a favor.”

Elfiné bit down on her lower lip. The fact that Clauvia knew about her illicit entry into the Astral Garden left her with no way to refuse.

“There’s one thing I need to know…,” Elfiné said quietly. “What exactly did you find?”

Clauvia’s lips curled up. “An ancient life-form that crashed into the surface.”

“…A life-form?”

“That’s right. What the people of the old world used to call a Dark Lord.”

◆

“You didn’t have to change, Leo. It’s such a waste.”

“I—I wasn’t going to wear that outfit a second more than I had to!” Leonis shouted from the back seat of Riselia’s military vehicle.

“But you were so cute… Oh, we’re going into a tunnel.”

Looking up, Leonis could see the light shining ahead of him. As they came out of the city’s coupling bridge and passed by a certification gate, the view of high-rise buildings set against a clear azure sky spread out before

them. At the center of the cityscape were two massive, imposing buildings that exuded a powerful presence.

“That’s the museum, and right next to it is the anti-Void research institute,” Riselia explained.

“It’s larger than I imagined…,” Leonis muttered.

The structure rivaled Death Hold’s treasury in size. After driving for a while, the pair found themselves in a business district, and Riselia began slowing down.

“This is the Sixth Assault Garden’s famous Academy Street. There’s a lot of restaurants here,” the young woman said.

I see.

Indeed, appetizing scents wafted in from every direction.

“Are you hungry, Leo?”

“Yes, a little…,” he replied honestly.

During a break, he’d had some of Regina’s homemade apple pie, but he was in a growing boy’s body, after all. His stomach was already beginning to growl.

How utterly inconvenient, Leonis griped.

“Then let’s grab something to eat before we go to the museum,” decided Riselia. She parked her vehicle on the shoulder of the road and took out a terminal.

“Hmm, if I recall, there’s this famous crepe place somewhere around here… Ah, over there.” Riselia pointed ahead to a store with many students lined up in front of it. “This place lets you pick your favorite toppings. What do you want on yours, Leo?”

“…I, erm, don’t know.”

“Then let’s go with the classics. Chocolate, strawberry, and fresh cream.”

“That’ll do. Oh, here are my credits…” Leonis made to take out his terminal.

“It’ll be my treat,” Riselia said, stopping him. “You’ve been working really hard.”

“Really? Thank you.”

At first, Leonis felt a bit unsure about being pampered like this by his minion. It seemed an insult to his dignity as a Dark Lord. However, Blackas had advised him that it was more natural for a ten-year-old boy to presume upon the benevolence of others. Leonis decided to heed his comrade’s suggestion.

“There are all sorts of eateries here. We can try each one out,” Riselia stated excitedly.

“…You’ll gain weight if you overeat,” chided Leonis.

“R-right… Well, getting two might be too much, so let’s just share one.”

“I’ll leave choosing to you.”

It’s not like a vampire can gain weight.

Riselia took her crepe with one hand and held on to Leonis's with the other.

"Let's go to the next store, then. That one over there's really popular!"

"…M-Miss Selia, you don't have to hold my hand!"

"No, you don't know this city. What if you get lost? Come on."

With her palm clasped around Leonis's, Riselia set off.

◆

A dark figure watched the pair stroll off from her perch on a nearby rooftop.

Grrr, m-my lord…!

It was none other than Shary. Per Leonis's orders, she'd extended the shadow corridors' reach over to the Sixth Assault Garden, keeping a watchful eye for any suspicious beings that might be on the move. Yet as the assassin had been vigilantly standing guard, she'd spotted Leonis and Riselia holding hands and was positively sulking and seething.

Riselia Crystalia was a minion Leonis himself had created. What's more, she was a Vampire Queen, the highest level of undead. As inexperienced as she was right now, she would undoubtedly prove to be a powerful commander by the time the Dark Lords' Armies rose once again.

What's more, Riselia had even saved Leonis's life during the battle in the ruined city. Shary was grateful for that, of course, but…

A mere m-m-minion clinging to him like that! It's…insolent! Improper!

Shary looked down at her palms. As an assassin, her hands had delivered swift and absolute death to her Dark Lord's enemies. She'd never held his hands like Riselia was.

I could never do something so…discourteous…

Raising her head, Shary watched as the two bought more sweets. Pulled along by his silver-haired underling, Leonis followed with his cheeks flushed. That girl likely couldn't tell…but she was, without a doubt, the target of his affection.

If Riselia were to build up her strength as a Vampire Queen, she would eventually be worthy of waiting upon Leonis, serving as his protector. Should that come to pass, Shary might not be necessary anymore.

The assassin nervously clenched her fingers around the bone ring Leonis had given her.

"…?!"

Turning around sharply, Shary hurled a shadow knife. The blade stabbed into the ground with a shrill sound.

"Would you care to reveal yourself?" Shary coldly insisted as she drew several more daggers from under her skirt.

Shadows began swirling in a spiral shape and then took human form. Like the spider creature Leonis had battled several days ago, this was another demon.

"You do not seem to be a mere human, girl. Are you a vampire minion…?"

“Vampire…” Shary raised her brows in surprise.

There was no doubting that this demon was after Riselia Crystalia.

I must report this to my lord immediately.

Yet upon trying to send a telepathic message to Leonis, she found she couldn’t.

I’m being shut off?!

“It’s an isolation barrier,” the demon revealed with a sneer.

“?!”

Sensing another presence, Shary jumped into the air. The shadows on the spot she’d just occupied bubbled up and stirred as two more creatures appeared from within them—bat-like demons with writhing tendrils extending from their arms.

“You didn’t catch us in your trap, girl. We snared you in ours.”

◆

After checking out some of the eateries, Leonis and Riselia made their way to the museum and were now standing right in front of the imposing building.

“Eating while you walk is fun, isn’t it, Leo?” Riselia said as she chewed on a meat skewer.

“You won’t have room for dinner if you consume that much,” Leonis told her with a hint of astonishment, though he was enjoying a skewer as well.

The warm juices of the meat filled his mouth when he bit into the fried exterior. Chewing down on the cartilage was satisfying.

“Oh well,” Riselia replied with a shrug.

As if from nowhere, droplets began to pour from the sky.

Riselia looked up, shielding her eyes with her hands. “…Huh. It’s raining?”

“I guess the administration bureau’s forecast was wrong,” Leonis concluded.

“Well, it happens. Sudden weather changes are part of life on an artificial island.” The sight of the clouds filled Riselia with anxiety. She could see lightning flashing in the direction of the coast. “Still, this is awfully sudden. Looks like it might even turn into a storm.”

“Let’s hurry to the museum and get inside, then,” Leonis suggested.

“Right…”

The two of them hurried into the building as beads of water splashed on the ground. They presented their Excalibur Academy student IDs at the gate and entered the premises. Other students in their uniforms were gathered here and there around the entrance.

“You get to go in with a child’s fee, Leo,” Riselia told him.

“Stop treating me like a kid,” Leonis replied indignantly.

However, since the admission fee drew on his registered information when debiting his credits, it automatically applied the discount, so he ended up paying for a child’s ticket anyway.

At the plaza in front of the gate was a monument of a massive sword lodged into a rock.

"What's that?" Leonis asked.

"A monument of the Holy Sword," Riselia said, holding up her index finger. "It's said that sixty-four years ago, when the Voids began their invasion, His Majesty the Emperor was granted the power of the first Holy Sword. When the secondary invasion took place, His Majesty laid down his life, and the power of that Holy Sword was lost, but…"

"That one actually *looks* like a sword," Leonis pointed out. So many of the weapons were anything but.

"Well, yes. The reason the powers granted to us by the planet are called Holy Swords is because the first one was a proper blade."

Hmm. That's a museum for you. I've made some informative discoveries before even making it to a proper exhibit.

The building's interior was packed with people, many of whom had probably filed inside to find refuge from the sudden shower. Riselia led Leonis with her hand still clasped around his. Evidently, she'd already been to the establishment a few times and was familiar with the place.

"If you want to see everything this museum has to offer properly, one day won't be enough," she told Leonis.

"…That's how it seems, yes," he answered with a nod.

That much he understood from the size of the place alone. In addition to the main building, there was also an annex with a botanical garden that hosted plants from all over the world.

"For now, let's just go along the suggested route and look around," Riselia decided.

◆

The two left the front gate behind and moved into a large open-air hall.

Wh-what in the world is that?!

At its center was a gigantic mass of bones set on display.

"That's the king of the ancient animal world. It's a dragon's skeleton," Riselia told him, noticing his surprise.

"A dragon's…?!"

Leonis approached the fence surrounding the thing, looking up at its towering majesty with awe. It was all too different from the Greater Worm he'd met in the labyrinth. This was a complete dragon skeleton.

And it's a pretty large one at that. Based on the shape of its horns, I'd say it was a red dragon?

When all was said and done, Leonis believed dragons were extremely dignified and inspiring. In his enthusiasm, the Dark Lord almost leaned in over the fence.

"L-Leo, you can't touch it!" Riselia pulled him back. "You have to respect the museum's rules."

“U-understood. I’m sorry, I just got a little excited…,” Leonis apologized meekly.

I never expected to find such an exquisite piece in a place like this…

Leonis glanced at the skeleton with a sinister grin. He’d given up the hope of repairing his skull dragon, thinking the materials he required were simply not around in this era. That was not the case anymore.

“Where did they discover this skeleton?” Leonis questioned enthusiastically.

“Erm, these bones aren’t real, Leo,” Riselia admitted with a bit of a stiff smile.

“…Huh?”

“The true one is in a laboratory in the capital. This is just a replica.”

“R-replica?”

Leonis peered at the skeleton, and indeed, on closer inspection, he discovered that the bones weren’t genuine, just meticulously forged facsimiles. Even if he were to chant the Realm of Death’s sorcery, he wouldn’t be able to manipulate this skeleton.

They dare fool me with fake bones. Leonis gritted his teeth.

“There are real bones on display deeper in, though,” Riselia appended, pulling Leonis by the hand as they left the dragon skeleton behind.

They exited the open-air hall and walked down the marked route. They passed through a tunnel, reaching the next chamber. Behind cases of transparent glass, Leonis could see the skeletons of ancient creatures on display.

“This is an exhibit for ancient animal bones discovered in ancient ruins. A lot of these were discovered by Excalibur Academy expedition teams.”

Leonis was only half listening to her explanation.

Ooh, this is an ogre skeleton!

Leonis’s face was positively plastered against the glass case. Behind it was a massive frame of bones, easily seven or eight times his height. Ogres were a monster race who served Dizolf Zoa, the Lord of Rage. The gigantic creatures devoured humans and demi-humans.

Many of them were dim-witted and savage, but there were highly intelligent ogres as well called ogre shamans. They were capable of casting spells up to the third order.

The ogre’s breastbone had a mark on it that implied it had been gouged through with a blade. Apparently, this one was the real deal.

I have thought I could use some larger skeletons.

An ogre would serve as a suitable training partner for Riselia. She was approaching the point where ordinary soldiers were no longer posing a challenge to her.

Can I steal it away without anyone noticing?

If all he wanted to was simply take it, he could just swallow the thing up into the Realm of Shadows. However, if he constructed a fake and set it up

instead, maybe no one would notice it was missing. Leonis crossed his arms as he fell into contemplation.

“You’re thinking about doing something bad again, aren’t you, Leo?” Riselia glared at him peevishly.

“…H-how can you tell?!” Startled at being exposed, Leonis raised his head in a fluster. He hadn’t even been making an evil face.

“I’m your minion. I can see right through you and know what you’re thinking,” Riselia joked with a smile.

I have to be careful around her, Leonis noted, clicking his tongue sullenly.

For the time being, he decided to give up on stealing this ogre skeleton. Looking around, he saw more monster skeletons. Griffins, nagas, kobolds, harpies, crystalized demon cores…

“Isn’t it weird to think that, just a few centuries ago, there were creatures like these walking around everywhere?” Riselia whispered.

From Leonis’s point of view, these were all creatures.

“Did all these monsters go extinct at some point?” inquired Leonis.

“Yes. People call the event where they all died out the Great Divide.”

What caused so many monsters on the surface to disappear was still unknown. Perhaps it was a meteor impact or the spread of some cursed plague. It could also have been the planet’s mana running wild. Some even thought that Voids had appeared centuries ago to wipe them out, with humanity being none the wiser.

The Voids, hmm?

The mysterious life-forms who emerged from cracks in midair were still a mystery. Yet, their forms had characteristics of ancient creatures. People had even gone so far as to designate them with the names of monsters, like ogre class or wyvern class.

Leonis suspected they were not born of emptiness, but were originally living beings that had been transformed by some sort of external influence. The Archsage, Arakael Degradios, and the Holy Woman, Tearis Resurrectia, had both been resurrected as Voids. Tearis had also turned the souls of the Crystalia Knights into Voids. In all cases, an existing entity had been perverted to create a Void.

But if that’s the case, why do the Voids appear from cracks in reality? What resides on the other side of those fractures? Leonis mulled over the questions but could not arrive at any answer on his own.

“Oh, Leo… And, Selia?” A voice called out from behind. Leonis and Riselia turned at the same time and saw two people looking at them.

“Miss Finé?” Riselia said in surprise.

It was indeed Elfiné. She’d changed back into her school uniform. “Oh, e-erm…,” she stammered, acting more awkward than usual.

“Mm, who are these? Friends of yours, Finé?” a woman clad in a lab coat, who stood next to her, asked.

She had sleek black hair cut to shoulder length. Her features were quite similar to Elfiné's, and there was no questioning her beauty.

Mm. She looks an awful lot like Elfiné…? Leonis furrowed his brow.

"I'm Clauvia Phillet. Finé's elder sister," the woman introduced.

Her sister. Yes, I can see it. That explained the resemblance. Their personalities seem quite dissident, however.

Something about Clauvia gave Leonis the feeling she was a bottomless abyss of secrets, like she carried some kind of devilish aspect.

"Oh, you're Miss Finé's sister! I'm, uh, Riselia Crystalia," Riselia greeted, slipping over her words excitedly. "I'm in the same platoon as Miss Finé, and um, she always compensates for my failures, and—"

"Selia, calm down." Elfiné regarded her friend with an awkward smile.

"Crystalia?" Upon hearing that, Clauvia's eyes narrowed a little. "I see, so you're…"

"I'm Leonis Magnus, likewise of the eighteenth platoon," Leonis stated politely.

"A pleasure… My, you have a child in your platoon?" Clauvia questioned, a bit surprised.

"Leo's a full-fledged Holy Swordsman," Elfiné chided her sister before turning to Selia. "So you two came to the museum on a date?"

"Yes, Leo wanted to visit."

A date? Leonis thought, perplexed.

"There's no shortage of things to see," remarked Elfiné. "This place has enough for multiple trips, so feel free to come back for as long as the Sixth Assault Garden remains coupled."

"So, what are you and your sister here for?" Riselia inquired.

"Clauvia blackmai—I mean, uh, requested that I help her out with something," Elfiné replied with a shrug. "So now I have to help her analyze the relic they excavated in the tundra."

"What?! That's incredible!" Riselia exclaimed.

"That's right, my little Finé's so talented," Clauvia said with evident satisfaction.

Elfiné shot a sharp glare at her before continuing.

"Anyway, we're headed for a special, restricted passage connecting the museum and the research institute in the basement level."

They'd run into Riselia and Leonis on their way.

The object they discovered in the tundra. This is a good chance. When Leonis had first heard Lena's report, he was half prepared to disregard it entirely, but he wasn't about to pass up on a chance to get his hands on a genuine Origin Spirit.

"Hmm, excuse me…?" Leonis spoke to Clauvia hesitantly. "Is there any way we could see that relic?"

"…Leo?" Elfiné regarded him with surprise.

"Hmm. You're interested in ancient ruins, kid?" Clauvia asked him.

"Yes."

“I see. Well, it’s a military secret, so outsiders aren’t allowed near it…,” she responded, making a theatrical pensive gesture.

Exactly the sort of answer I expected. I suppose I’ll have to take control of this woman.

Yet just as Leonis was preparing to use his Evil Eye of Domination…

“—But fine. If you’re just going to look, I don’t mind,” Clauvia Phillet stated with a wink.

“You don’t?” Leonis checked, taken aback.

“Clauvia?” Elfiné turned to her sister with suspicious eyes.

“Honestly, I can’t really let you see it. But since you’re friends with Finé, I’ll make an exception.”

◆

“Breath of respite, bestow the boon of slumber—Sleep Cloud.”

As soon as the chant was verbalized, a cloud of slumber filled the anti-Void research institute’s central sector, and all the lab’s staff passed out.

“Now we won’t have to needlessly hurt anyone,” Arle Kirlesio said from under her hood and mask.

“Not bad. Was that some kind of elf sorcery?” Lena inquired, patting her on the shoulder.

“Something like that…,” Arle replied unenthusiastically.

“We’re done busting the security cameras,” one of the beastmen said.

“For now, let’s tie everyone up.”

“Yeah, yeah. All right…”

The group got to work binding the unconscious researchers.

It’s a good thing they didn’t resist.

Arle was relieved that no one had to be hurt.

“I’m surprised we got in this easily, though,” Lena remarked. “I thought security would be tighter, what with them having an Origin Spirit sealed here.”

“They had three military Holy Swordsmen on guard; that’s plenty tight security,” one of the beastmen replied.

“Hmm. I suppose.”

Arle had taken those Holy Swordsmen by surprise and knocked them out. Holy Swords were a powerful force with varied abilities, but their wielders weren’t well organized. The blue-haired girl Arle had crossed blades with in the ruined city had been far stronger.

“Huh. Wait, you’re the Sovereign Wolves…!” one of the scientists exclaimed upon waking.

“Not anymore.” Lena approached the man, looking down at him with a knife in hand. “We’re the Demon Wolf Pack.”

“Ahhh!” the researcher screeched with fear.

“I need to ask you something. The Sixth Assault Garden’s expedition team discovered something in the tundra, right?”

“…!”

“And don’t bother playing dumb. We know about the Origin Spirit you’ve got here.”

“A spirit? What are you talking about?!”

“Feigning ignorance, huh?” one of the beastmen growled. “In that case…”

“Watch it.” Arle stopped the beastman, who was about to start abusing the researcher.

“It’s fine,” Lena said. “We’ll just use this.”

She stole the researcher’s card key, inserted it into the terminal, and started tapping on its keyboard.

“Heh-heh-heh, I’m actually pretty good with this sort of thing…,” Lena muttered proudly. “Right, the seventh sealed sector. That’s the place.”

Lena pushed a button, and footage appeared on the terminal’s monitor. Immediately, she eyed the video suspiciously. “Mm? Wait, what is this…?”

“What’s wrong, Lena?” the other Demon Wolf Pack members asked.

Arle peered from behind and had to stop herself from gasping aloud.

It can’t be… Why…? How is that here?!

◆

Leonis and the others crossed the museum’s private corridor, moving into the laboratory’s underground level. Clauvia walked in the lead, releasing the locked doors along their way.

“Is your sister a really important person, Miss Elfiné?” Leonis asked her in a low tone.

“She’s a lead researcher for the Phillet Company and the foremost authority when it comes to anti-Void experimentation,” Elfiné replied, her gaze fixed sharply on her elder sibling’s back.

I guess they don’t get along that well, Leonis concluded.

Suddenly, Clauvia stopped in front of the elevator and pressed the communication terminal to her ear. “This is strange…,” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Elfiné questioned.

“I can’t get in touch with the central sector.”

“Do you think something happened?”

“Well, there’s a storm outside. Maybe the Artificial Elementals are unstable.” With a shrug, Clauvia held up her ID card to the door of an elevator.

Leonis and the others got inside and rode down.

Clauvia promptly turned to Riselia and said, “So you’re Duke Crystalia’s daughter.”

“Huh? Hmm, yes…,” Riselia muttered, taken off guard.

“A survivor of the Third Assault Garden’s Stampede—”

“Clauvia!” Elfiné snapped at her sister, who continued undisturbed.

“Duke Crystalia published multiple fascinating theses on ancient ruins. He wasn’t affiliated with the empire’s research institute, but he was a brilliant scholar.”

“Yes. Father would always shut himself off in the study, throwing himself into his work,” Riselia responded.

“Tell me, are you interested in investigating ancient sites, too?” Clauvia pressed.

“I am. My majors at the academy are archaic linguistics and ruin archaeology…”

Perhaps in an attempt to protect Riselia, Elfiné butted into the conversation. “Clauvia, could you please stop trying to pull my platoon members into your business?”

“That’s a shame. I was just looking for a good assistant…”

The elevator’s doors opened. Clauvia stepped into the corridor first, reaching out to unlock the door. “Now, I think I’ve already made it clear, but everything you’ll see here is top secret.”

“Should we really be here?” Riselia checked again.

“You’re Finé’s friends, so it’s no problem. Besides, I think that as Duke Crystalia’s daughter, you have the right to see this. We would never have discovered this without his research.”

A thick metallic bulkhead slowly opened with a rumble, revealing a massive space illuminated by mana lights. A humongous block of ice rested in the center of the chamber, held in place by multiple steel fixtures.

Wh…? What…?!

Leonis was speechless. Not because of the ice block’s size, but rather, because of the thing sealed within it.

It was unmistakably a crimson dragon.

And it wasn’t just any dragon. Leonis had engaged in mortal combat with this particular one many times. The tyrannical despot beckoned storms with his sheer presence and reigned sovereign over the skies.

It was one of the Eight Dark Lords who had fought alongside the Goddess of Rebellion—Veira, the Dragon Lord.

It can’t be… What is this Dragon Lord doing here…?!

Leonis stood agape, his breath stilled. Veira should have fallen to the Six Heroes in the Demon Dragon’s Mountain Range, yet here she was. Leonis could tell; the Dragon Lord was undoubtedly, unmistakably alive.

“Clauvia, what did you…?!” Elfiné turned to face her sister.

However, the elder sister’s gaze was transfixed on the frozen thing before them, entranced.

Why is Veira…? Leonis took one loud step forward. It was a completely unconscious act. However…

<Le…nis….>

“…?!”

Hearing a voice in his mind, Leonis looked up in shock.

“…Veira?”

Crack! Small fissures ran through the ice block’s surface.

<Le…o…nis…!>

Crack, crack…!

“…?!”

“…Leo?!” Riselia reflexively caught the boy by the arm, pulling him back.

No sooner had she done so than the ice block encasing the Dragon Lord shattered to pieces.

CHAPTER 6
THE INFERNAL DRAGON LORD

She had finally awakened from her thousand-year seal. The lord of the skies, the bringer of storms. The herald of calamity. Ruler of the world and sovereign among sovereigns.

Veira, the Dragon Lord. The grand ruler of the dragons, who had slumbered in this icy prison, awaiting the goddess's rebirth.

However, the great creature's soul had been tainted. Nothingness was consuming her spirit, eating into it from within. Her awakened consciousness was corrupted, and…

◆

Groooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh…!

Veira's howl quaked the world. Her frozen prison was ripped asunder at once, sending gigantic ice fragments ripping into the bulkheads like paper.

"…Nng, Rua Meires!"

Leonis reflexively deployed a mana barrier, protecting Riselia and the others behind him. Emergency lights came on, and a shrill alarm blared through the laboratory.

"…Veira… You truly are alive…" Leonis groaned as he watched the dragon rise, now freed from its seal.

Veira was a Dark Lord of the same rank as Leonis. Until now, Leonis had thought she'd met her end against the Six Heroes.

That ice block. It was the highest tier of Dragon Tongue Sorcery, the Frozen Prison of Time, Ex Quiriz.

The permafrost container guarded against interference from all powers and suspended the soul. Even the flames at the heart of the world could not melt it. Veira had willingly encased herself in this prison, where she had slumbered for a millennium.

Just like I did…

The crimson dragon started unfurling her wings as emergency bulkheads began to come down. Lightning-like mana began shining around Veira.

Is she going to fly out of here?

Veira raised her head, looking to the sky far above it. Incandescent light began gathering in her jaw.

"Leo, get down…!" Riselia shouted, pushing Leonis to the floor.

Bwhooooooooooosh!

The burning flash evaporated several levels' worth of special alloy bulwarks in the blink of an eye. Metal fragments rained down, the deafening sound of them clattering to the floor ringing in Leonis's ears.

"…!" Lying on the floor, Leonis looked up. Overhead, he could now spy the sky through the massive hole Veira had blasted. Lightning boomed and flashed in the gathering storm clouds.

Graaaaaaaaaaah!

The Dragon Lord raised her voice in a growling cry as her massive form took off. She wasn't using her wings to fly. Many dragons soared by enveloping their bodies in mana. The crimson dragon floated up quietly, escaping into the outside world.

"What…?" Elfiné was the first to recover from her stunned silence. "What was that monster?! Clauvia, what was that?!"

"That was unexpected. I never thought this would be how the Dark Lord's seal would break…," Clauvia stated, eyes fixed above.

"…Dark Lord?" Elfiné questioned blankly.

"That's right," Clauvia whispered. "That creature was a ruler in ancient times, a harbinger of death, destruction, and chaos that rebelled against the gods of this planet. Duke Crystalia referred to beings like that dragon as Dark Lords."

Leonis turned to look at Clauvia suspiciously. He was sure the people of this era had forgotten all about the Dark Lords and the gods.

Just how much did Riselia's father know?

Now wasn't the time to pursue that line of questioning, however. Not when Veira, the Dragon Lord, was alive, awake, and rampaging.

"If we let that monster run free, it'll wipe out the entirety of the Sixth Assault Garden!" Elfiné exclaimed.

"And the Seventh Assault Garden, too. Both will be leveled in half a day," Clauvia appended.

"….!" Elfiné glared at her sister.

"Miss Elfiné, things are going to get chaotic. We have to evacuate the civilians," Riselia said.

"You're right…" Elfiné manifested multiple Eye of the Witch orbs in the air around her.

"The lab's central sector still isn't responding…," Clauvia stated with a perplexed expression, pressing a terminal to her ear.

"I'll go check it out," Riselia decided, turning to face Leonis. "Leo, you should—"

Yet the boy wasn't there. Instead, he was standing beneath the shaft with the Staff of Sealed Sins in his hands.

"Leo?!" Riselia cried, startled.

"I'll go after that dragon!" he declared before using his sorcery to fly up.

"…Wait, Leo!"

◆

A siren blared. People screamed in terror as the shadow of the giant dragon loomed above. But amid this chaos, a single young man in priestly garb walked composedly through the laboratory.

“That’s strange. This is much sooner than I’d expected,” the Void called Nefakess Reizaad said with suspicion.

Veira had awakened before the Trapezohedron’s corruption could completely corrupt her soul.

“I suppose that’s just a testament to the great Dragon Lord’s power.”

Then Nefakess wondered if there was some other factor at play. Regardless, Veira’s spirit would be consumed before long, revealing if she was a suitable vessel for the goddess.

“Oh. My, my…”

His gaze then turned to a glass pane separating the lab from a corridor, where a single girl sprinted past him. She was a beautiful sight with flowing, argent hair.

“Aaah, how lovely. This must be the goddess’s guidance at work…,” Nefakess remarked, his thin lips contorting into a vicious smile.

◆

As the wind raged violently around her, Shary saw the gigantic red dragon soar past her from atop a high-rise building.

“…Is that Lord Veira?!” Her eyes widened in shock.

Why is the Dragon Lord here?! Just what is going on in this city?!

“Getting distracted? How complacent!”

A six-legged lizard demon extended its long spear-like tongue toward the maid. Shary narrowly avoided it, slashing through the tongue and severing it down the middle. The demon howled, but Shary ignored it and turned around, casually tossing a dagger behind her as she did. A bat demon that had been closing in on her let out a pained screech.

“The Dragon Lord… Is this your doing?” she asked the spiral demon as she drew another dagger from under her skirt.

The spiral demon was likely the leader of the group. The lizard and bat ones were equal in strength to the spider demon that attacked the academy. The spiral demon, however, was stronger.

“I know nothing of it. I only follow my master’s orders,” the creature asserted.

“…Your master?”

“You think an assassin would reveal their boss’s name?”

The spiral demon vanished from sight. A moment later, the shadows beneath Shary’s feet began to churn.

He’s a user of shadows, just like me!

Shary jumped away, hurling a knife at her feet. Unfortunately, the spiral demon deflected it easily.

“You, at least, seem to be a bit more capable than the rest,” the assassin remarked, her dusk-colored eyes glinting.

Three daggers flew through the air and then stabbed into the ground in a formation around the hovering spiral demon.

"—Vars Rea!"

Using the weapons as a conduit, Shary unleashed a third-order shadow magic spell—the Umbral Lightning Slash. Black electricity lashed at the demon repeatedly. It was unlikely to kill an opponent of this level, but it would buy Shary time.

She kicked off the ground and raced vertically up a water tower, the hems of her skirt flapping as she ran.

"Shaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Countless ebon tendrils extended toward her from atop the structure. It was the bat demon. Shary avoided all of them handily, jumping into the air and then planting the soles of her boots into the creature. The bat demon crashed into the roof of the water tower, and Shary mercilessly drove a dagger into its throat. After a final howl of agony, the monstrous thing met its end.

Taking a life is all too simple.

Looking up, Shary found the red dragon again. Veira soared toward the Seventh Assault Garden, destroying the city beneath it with sheer wind pressure. There was someone following it, too, jumping between the rooftops.

M-my lord?! Spotting Leonis, Shary made to follow him.

Whish…!

A shadow coiled around her wrist, however, holding the girl in place.

"You're not going anywhere."

The spiral demon extended another arm. At the same time, more of its ilk were gathering on the rooftop.

"You fools. Can't you tell how much stronger I am?" Shary sighed as she took out another dagger. "As your senior in the arts of assassination, I suppose I have an obligation to put you in your place."

◆

Riselia raced up the research institute's emergency staircase with blinding speed. The steps had crumbled here and there, but she was using mana to leap over anything in her way.

Clauvia Phillet had called the gigantic dragon trapped inside the ice block a Dark Lord. Riselia was familiar with that term.

The book Father left behind mentioned that creature's name…

A sovereign of the ancient world, Veira, the Dragon Lord.

She'd only been able to decipher the monster's name, though. Riselia didn't know anything about what kind of creature it was. Still, the terrifying power of that dragon was palpable.

Leo went after it, but… Riselia knew, of course, that Leonis was an exceptional sorcerer. Yet as strong as he was, his body was still that of a child.

Thud!

Riselia smashed open the bulkhead sealing the central sector with a kick.

"…Huh?" Her eyes widened in surprise at the sight that greeted her inside. The researchers were all tied up with ropes and lying on the floor. "Wh-what…?"

Before she could run over to help them, the rumbling roar of gunfire brought her to a stop.

"…?!"

Riselia reflexively took cover behind the broken bulkhead.

"Dammit, now we've gotta deal with a Holy Swordsman!"

"What the hell was that monster?!"

"Wasn't it supposed to be a spirit?!"

A group of beastmen with hoods over their faces were shouting to one another as they fired their rifles.

"Holy Sword—Activate!" Riselia chanted, and her Bloody Sword manifested in her hands. She cut a shallow scratch into her wrist, letting blood laced with mana drip onto the floor. Then she brandished her weapon, allowing the crimson liquid running along it to drop, and suddenly, the red puddle on the floor turned to countless sharp edges that swept the barrage of bullets from the air.

"Ahhhhh!" The terrorists ran off at this demonstration of power.

Paying no heed to the fleeing insurgents, Riselia swung her Holy Sword and sent blades of blood to cut the bound researchers free.

"Everyone, evacuate to the surfac—"

Before Riselia could even finish her instructions, the scientists scrambled toward the exits. The terrorists were getting away, too. Unfortunately, she didn't have the time to go after them, as fires were beginning to break out in the facility.

I need to get out of here, quick—

Riselia dashed out into a corridor, checking for more survivors. She did find someone, though it was certainly not who the young woman had been expecting.

"You're…?!" Riselia raised her voice in surprise.

There stood a slender girl who looked to be thirteen or perhaps fourteen. Her verdant hair was tied into a ponytail, and she had pointed ears. It was Arle Kirlesio, the elf Riselia and her platoon had rescued on the Third Assault Garden.

"A-are you working with these terrorists?!" Riselia asked, aghast.

"N-no! I'm not working with them—," Arle said hurriedly.

"Oh, no, listen, you can still turn back now! I can be your guardian, so—" Riselia was desperately trying to convince the girl.

"I already said: I'm *not* on their side!!" The elf shook her head to emphasize the point. "I simply happened to be with them because…well, things just happened!"

“Uh…” Riselia remained doubtful.

Arle shook her head again and then declared, “I’ll go defeat that dragon.”

“H-huh?!” Riselia stammered with surprise.

“Such is the mission I was given.”

Wh-what is she saying?!

Riselia wondered if perhaps the culture shock of being brought to a new city was causing Arle to act weird. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence among newly rescued refugees.

She really should’ve been sheltered in Excalibur Academy…

“Listen, it’s dangerous here right now,” Riselia told the other girl with the kindest voice she could manage. “You should come with me, and—”

“Oh, so you’re with a hero of the old world, too. How unexpected.”

Riselia and Arle turned to face this new voice. On the opposite side of the hall stood a familiar, slender, white-haired man in the priestly garb of the Human Church. It was the mysterious person Riselia had encountered in the Crystalia Estate.

“You. You’re the one from the ruined city,” Arle stated, glaring. Apparently, she was acquainted with this man, too.

“Nefakess Void Lord.” The man bowed his head in a refined, friendly gesture.

“You’re the one who unleashed the Dragon Lord!” Arle shouted as she drew her blade.

“No, the humans were the ones who dug up Lord Veira. I didn’t help them with that. Regardless of my involvement, she would’ve awakened in her own in time,” Nefakess explained with a shrug. “Still, I’m content to let Lord Veira rampage to her heart’s content. I’ve only come for that young lady there.”

With a thin smile, the white-haired man gazed intently at Riselia.

“Were you the one who destroyed the goddess’s vessel in the ruined city?” asked Nefakess.

“What are you talking about?” Riselia replied, meeting the strange person’s eyes unflinchingly.

A goddess… Does he mean that Void Lord? I didn’t do that. It was Leo…

Some part of Riselia instinctually understood that letting this man know that was a bad idea, though.

He must be an enemy of Leo’s…

Holding up her Bloody Sword, Riselia took slow, careful steps backward, retreating. Her vampire senses told her there was danger about. This man was no ordinary human.

“Well, that’s fine. There are plenty of ways to get what I want from you,” Nefakess stated composedly.

“…!”

Arle sidled up to Riselia and whispered, “Fires raging all around. We can’t afford to fight here.”

“Right…”

Thanks to Riselia’s improved perception, she was already aware of the smoke beyond this passage. Since the young woman had an undead body, she wasn’t vulnerable to suffocation. However, as a Vampire Queen, she was susceptible to fire.

“I’ll give you an opening, so run to the surface,” Arle instructed.

“Understood.” Riselia gave a quick nod.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Baaaaaaaaang!

Arle swung her sword overhead and slammed it against the floor.

“Huh? H-hey!”

A tremor ran through the structure, and the floor beneath them caved in at once.

“Come on. We’re jumping!”

Arle grabbed Riselia’s hand and sprung up.

◆

The fierce rain whipped so violently that Leonis was having trouble seeing, and the frequent bolts of lightning weren’t helping.

…She’s quick. Where is she even headed?

Leonis sailed through the stormy sky in pursuit of Veira’s gigantic red form. He couldn’t hope to catch up to her with gravity control spells. Instead, he was kicking off the walls of the countless high-rise buildings dotting the city, using them as footing to propel himself with explosions of mana.

Leonis was never excellent when it came to flying. He could use earth sorcery to levitate, but that didn’t convey him swiftly enough. True flight was the realm of air magic, but that element was a poor fit for undead physiology, and Leonis never mastered it fully.

On occasions when flight was a necessity, he’d always summoned his skull dragon, but riding such a conspicuous mount wasn’t possible in a densely populated city. At worst, the Assault Garden’s antiair defenses would shoot him down.

Shary, where are you?!

Leonis had been trying to send the assassin telepathic messages for some time now, but he got no response. There was some magical interference in place. That wasn’t something Shary would ever overlook, though. Which meant she was probably fighting someone.

I wanted to have her guard Riselia, but I guess that just isn’t possible now.

Shary was…probably fine. And if worse came to worst, he did give her *that thing* for a reason. Right now, Leonis had to focus on pursuing the Dragon Lord.

Seeing Veira alive was a massive shock for Leonis, but he accepted it quickly enough. Some part of him had always felt that someone of Veira’s

tenacity wouldn't die easily. He had fought Veira several times in the past, and she'd always managed to survive.

I swear I've killed that infernal dragon several times over, and she found a way to cheat death every single time.

Veira was headed in the Seventh Assault Garden's direction. The city had already transitioned to anti-Void interception mode and was firing. None of their attacks would so much as scratch Veira, though.

…Don't tell me she's headed for Excalibur Academy.

As he soared through the blowing wind, Leonis broke into a nervous sweat. The academy was his base of operations. He couldn't afford to let it be destroyed.

She's gone completely berserk…

Veira wasn't a Dark Lord with a preference for meaningless slaughter. Of the Eight Dark Lords, she was one of the more sensible ones. But when enraged, the dragon became the most terrifying Dark Lord of all. She had once destroyed the mountains the gods occupied in the space of a single night.

I won't let you reduce my kingdom to ashes, Veira!

Leonis pushed off against another building.

"Lord Magnus."

A shadow stirred on the surface of the following structure Leonis was about to use as his footing. A black wolf appeared there, its fur wet.

"You've come, Blackas." Leonis smiled, running along the wall parallel to the dog.

"Lord Magnus, is that not the Dragon Lord? What is happening?"

"I don't know, either. Apparently, the beast was sealed in the tundra but was exhumed by humans."

As he sprinted, Leonis's thoughts were racing as well. Why did Veira awaken just as Leonis laid eyes on her? The timing was too conspicuous to be a coincidence.

"Get on," Blackas told him.

Leonis grabbed onto his friend's ebony fur and mounted his back. Blackas's coat was damp with rain.

"Looking like this suits you so much more, friend. The very image of a black wolf."

"I see…" Blackas nodded curtly as he leaped from shadow to shadow.

This was an ability called Shadow Crossing, something Leonis couldn't replicate. They rapidly closed in on Veira, but suddenly, the crimson dragon flapped her wings and stopped in midair.

"…What?!"

Groooooooooooooooooh!

A rumbling roar shook the skies above the Seventh Assault Garden. The air trembled and rattled, and windows shattered at once.

"A Dragon Beckon…!"

By filling their roars with mana, the greater dragon races could summon others of their kind. However, all true dragons had gone extinct. There were none to answer the cry.

Who is she calling?

Crack… Crack… Crack…!

Countless fissures formed throughout the air.

"…Voids?"

Monstrous, dragon-like voids tore through the fissures. Though they vaguely resembled the mighty creatures Leonis admired, they could never be mistaken for the genuine article. Their torsos were disgustingly swollen, their wings seemed to spurt from their backs in random places, and countless tendrils wiggled eerily from their bodies. These things seemed a mockery of all that was draconic—beholding them filled Leonis with anger and hatred.

"Veira. Even one as grand as you has been polluted by the Voids."

Rage swelled in Leonis's heart. The Archsage and Holy Woman had been similarly corrupted, but this was different. Veira was a dragon, the single greatest creature in existence. This was Leonis's worthy match and rival. Seeing her tainted and disgraced like this was unforgivable.

"Curse you! You would besmirch the title of Dark Lord?!"

Red flames billowed from the tip of the Staff of Sealed Sins. The eighth-order spell, Grand Annihilation Fireball. The massive crimson sphere burst in the sky. Torrents of scorching heat blew away the Voids emerging from the cracks!

◆

Sirens screamed through Excalibur Academy, alerting its personnel to enter class-1 combat positions. The events on the academy combat field were immediately called off, and all the platoons hurried to defend their home.

"I don't remember inviting those things to the Holy Light Festival!"

Regina climbed up to the dorm's roof, still dressed in her haunted café outfit. A large number of citizens had been evacuated to the lawn around the building.

"Everyone, get inside!" Regina called out from above.

While the structure looked rickety enough to be blown off by the storm, it was better that the civilians took shelter.

Her pigtails fluttering in the raging winds, Regina manifested her Holy Sword, the Drag Howl, and shouldered it. The sight in the sky was both incredible and frightening.

What are those things…?!

Flying among the dark clouds were countless dragon-class Voids.

Regina's Holy Sword was optimized for long-distance bombardment, but in its current form, it wouldn't be able to hit targets moving at high speeds accurately. On the other hand, these Voids were even larger than the

wyvern class, and her Holy Sword's Drag Striker mode lacked the firepower to penetrate their defenses.

Perhaps noticing the citizens gathered at the ground, the Void dragons circling overhead began gliding down toward the surface.

"You're not getting any closer!"

Bang, bang, bang, bang!

The Drag Howl flashed, spewing intermittent blasts of fire.

Whooosh…!

One dragon-class Void was shot down, crashing into the forest behind the dorm.

"That's one…," Regina muttered. Unfortunately, the Void she'd felled sluggishly rose to its feet only a few moments later.

…These things are tougher than I thought.

Bang, bang, bang!

Regina's Drag Howl loosed three more shots.

I have to hang on until Sakuya gets here…

Their strongest fighter, Sakuya, had been on a break at the training grounds when the attack began. Regina had tried to contact her, but apparently, the Voids were jamming communication.

She should still be on her way, Regina reasoned.

However, Sakuya could be caught in a battle herself. It was also possible she'd been mobilized into one of the executive committee's interception squadrons.

The shadow of a gigantic Void glided across the ground. Regina took aim at the creature soaring above and fired, but it paid no heed to her attacks. With a roar, a gout of flames gathered in its mouth.

Oh, crap…! Regina tried to meet the blast with a volley from her Drag Howl, but she hadn't reacted in time. A white flash of heat incinerated the forest's trees and quickly engulfed the dormitory and Regina with it!

"Serene mirror of the water gods—Arzays!"

The next moment, a shining blue spherical mirror manifested in front of Regina. The Void's surge of flames was drawn into the mirror, then dispersed back in every direction.

Boom, boom, boom-boom-boom!

The deflected fire exploded around the premises, forming burning pillars.

"Aaah…!"

The damage was great, but Regina and the dorm survived. Perplexed that she was still living, Regina searched for the source of the voice that had saved her. High in the sky, she spotted a robed skeleton holding a staff.

"H-huuuuuh?!" Regina cried out in astonishment, nearly falling off the roof.

"Kah-kah-kah! The dragons of my day were far more robust!" The bony figure cackled and rattled.

It then turned the tip of its staff toward the approaching Voids.

“Blow forth, wisp of the Dragon Lord’s breath—Raz Veira!”

Whoooooooooooooosh!

Coursing red flames reduced a pack of charging voids to cinders.

“…”

By this point, Regina could only stare at the scene, stupefied.

“You mustn’t hog all the prey, Sir Nefisgal!”

“Here, here! We deserve a chance at glory, too!”

These two new voices prompted Regina to look down. There she spied two more skeletons in battle armor.

“Worry not, friends! There’s plenty of enemies to go around, Sir Amilas, Sir Dorug!”

Feeling a sense of vertigo settle over, Regina pressed her finger against her temple. On closer inspection, she recognized these creatures. They were the skeleton props they’d set up in front of the haunted café’s entrance. Leonis had brought them to help set the mood.

“Ah…” Connecting the pieces, Regina shrugged.

It’s the kid with his tricks again…

She’d seen Leonis summon some kind of dragon made of bone aboard the *Hyperion*. These three were probably his doing as well, sentinels to guard the dorm.

I guess he’s been trying to keep his true power a secret, but he does such a terrible job at it!

In all likelihood, everyone in the eighteenth platoon had discerned that there was more to Leonis than meets the eye. After all the flashy stunts he’d pulled, it was impossible not to be suspicious. Only Leonis thought he was covert.

I guess we shouldn’t say anything if he’s that dead set on hiding it, then.

Regina didn’t know what he actually was. Yet, he had saved the life of her little sister, Princess Altiria. So even if the administration bureau started asking around about Leonis, Regina had every intention of protecting his secret.

I just hope a day comes when the kid feels ready to tell us the truth…

It was then that she heard a muffled voice coming from her communication terminal.

“—gina, ca—ear me?”

“Miss Finé?! Where are you right now?!”

“Sixth—rden—ask the Acad—forcements?”

Her voice sounded awfully shaken. Normal transmissions were still impossible. Elfiné must have been using the Eye of the Witch’s power to break through the Void’s jamming.

“—Are you asking if the academy can send you Holy Swordsmen for reinforcements?”

“Yes—lease—”

Unlike the Seventh Assault Garden, which often fought Void nests on the front lines, the Sixth Assault Garden was a supply city. There weren’t many

Holy Swordsmen stationed there. The academy's administration bureau was aware of that, but with no method of easy message relay, it would take them time to deploy.

Regina looked at the skeletal knights chattering among one another.

I can let the kid's skeletons handle protecting this place, right?

The robed skeleton did wipe out one of the larger Voids in the blink of an eye. If the other two were as strong as their companion, then they were wasted on guarding this dorm. Yet Regina had a feeling that though these skeletons were ordered to protect the Hræsvelgr dorm, they'd be indifferent to the fate of the rest of the academy. Was it really okay for Regina to leave?

It'd take me a while to get to the Sixth Assault Garden with a vehicle, too…

Regina bit on the nail of her thumb, conflicted. Fortunately, she spied a familiar shape dashing through the rain.

"Sakuya!"

"Sorry I'm late! I was caught up fighting the Voids!" Sakuya screeched to a halt in front of the gate.

"Can you go help protect the Sixth Assault Garden?!" Regina shouted down at her from the rooftop.

"What about the academy?" replied the swordswoman.

"We should be okay!"

"Understood!" After a quick nod, Sakuya disappeared into the storm as quickly as she had arrived. That was Thunderclap, an ability afforded by her Holy Sword that enabled the girl to accelerate through electromagnetism.

"I'm counting on you, Sakuya," Regina muttered as she held up her Drag Howl.

A dozen or so of the large Voids began to dive down toward the academy.

◆

"Two large specimens are approaching sector two! I repeat, two large specimens approaching—"

Standing amid the downpour in the museum's plaza, Elfiné busily transmitted information to assist in the citizens' evacuation and relay Void positions to the Holy Swordsmen fighting.

The Voids summoned by the red dragon were striking multiple points around the Sixth Assault Garden. There weren't many of the creatures, but each individual specimen had power that placed it at A rank. Only a group of multiple Holy Swordsmen working in tandem could defeat it.

"…Deploying eight orbs at once really is too taxing…"

Elfiné pressed a hand against her temple, trying to suppress the thumping headache that was washing over her. The overwhelming flood of information weighed heavy on her mind. During combat training, she only

used four orbs for probing, with two deployed for analysis and backup. Gathering information from all over the city was far more strenuous.

However, since the Void's jamming rendered the communication terminals useless, Elfiné's analysis-type Holy Sword remained their only hope.

A rumbling explosion sounded somewhere distant, and flames began spreading in all directions.

Leo, Selia…

Elfiné was worried about them. She'd lost the two after the ice block had shattered. While she could search for them with one of her orbs, her talents were needed elsewhere.

Clauvia's gone, too…

At some point, Elfiné's sister had vanished as well.

What is she thinking?

When they were younger, Elfiné had always thought of Clauvia as a bit of an eccentric girl, but she was still brilliant, and she loved her little sister dearly. Somewhere along the way, she'd become like a stranger to Elfiné.

Not even she had expected that dragon monster to break out.

Clauvia had wanted Elfiné to analyze it. But why come personally to her instead of the Phillet Company's research team…?

She called it a Dark Lord. What did that mean…?

CHAPTER 7
DARK LORD VS DARK LORD

Gooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!

With every howl loosed from Veira's maw, more corrupted dragons tore their way through fissures in reality. Dozens upon hundreds of Voids appeared from cracks, swooping and circling in the skies. Beholding the sight reminded Leonis of the Demon Dragon's Mountain Range.

"There's no end to them!" From atop Blackas, Leonis gritted his teeth.

It was unlikely Excalibur Academy would survive in the face of this overwhelming force. Against a Stampede, they only needed to slay the Void Lord leading it. This situation was a bit different, though. As far as Leonis could tell, Veira wasn't wholly transformed yet. Her flaming red scales looked just as they had one thousand years ago.

The Archsage, Arakael Degradios, and the Holy Woman, Tearis Resurrectia, had unquestionably become Voids, and their forms had reflected that change.

"Blackas, I don't believe she's entirely lost to the power of the Voids yet."

"That's—" Blackas began to reply but cut himself off. As a constant friend and companion of this Dark Lord, he aptly picked up on Leonis's feelings. "…Indeed. I suppose we cannot deny that possibility outright."

"I wish to save her," Leonis stated. "If we try now, it should still be possible."

"Is there some method of clearing away that corruption?"

"Yes. I will kill Veira. Then, using the sorcery of the Realm of Death, I shall resurrect her as an undead."

"You intend to make the Dragon Lord your minion?"

"I do. Though, I don't know if I'll succeed."

When left alone, dead Voids faded away and disappeared. Leonis wasn't at all sure if he could resurrect the great dragon with his magic. Even success didn't guarantee that Veira would be free of Void influence.

"Regardless, we can't fight it here!" Leonis declared, lifting the Staff of Sealed Sins. "Demonic stars, bend to my authority and plummet from your heavenly seat—Gran Mezekis!"

As Veira howled, a gigantic dark sphere formed above the dragon, bearing down on her as if trying to push the winged creature toward the earth.

Vooooooooooooooooooooooo!

Leonis had cast a tenth-order spell, the Shooting Star Avalanche. A condensed lump of gravity consumed the tyrant of the skies, sending her down into the ocean.

Whoosh!

Veira's collision with the sea sent up a spectacular spray of water. Blackas and Leonis floated over to the site of the dragon's impact.

"As is traditional, when two Dark Lords clash, we use this!"

Leonis produced a blood-colored orb from midair and held it above his head. The waters beneath him began to swirl and part, exposing the seabed. Waves of darkness gouged into the perimeter of the exposed ocean floor, forming a circular barrier.

This was the Goddess Boundary Field, a barrier produced by Roselia Ishtaris's unique sorcery. Even Leonis, who had activated the magic, couldn't escape it. There were only two methods of egress: combatants could stop fighting and reach an agreement, or one side died.

"Now I can fight without having to worry about the city being damaged," Leonis remarked. Looking down at Veira, who was collapsed on the seabed, he tried to draw the sword hiding within his staff. The effort proved fruitless, however.

I thought so.

Since the goddess's Demon Sword, Dáinsleif, was powerful to the point of extreme danger, there were significant restrictions placed on its use. Leonis could only draw the weapon to defend his kingdom. What's more, it could be used against fellow Dark Lords or other servants of the Goddess of Rebellion.

It's quite the handicap, given I'm fighting Veira.

Dragons had a heavy resistance to magic, a unique trait of their species. For a sorcerer like Leonis, a dragon was the worst possible opponent. And since he was in the body of a young boy, his mana reserves were greatly diminished.

There's no other option, though, Leonis thought with a sardonic smile. He descended to the exposed ocean floor with the Staff of Sealed Sins in hand.

◆

A bolt of lightning crackled through the sky as the downpour buffeted a downtown alleyway.

"Hissssssssssss!" A lizard demon howled as it lunged down.

Shary dodged it, her skirt billowing in the stormy weather. Whirling, she launched a blade of darkness through the air. The knife struck the lizard demon square in the head, sending it sinking back down into the shadows.

"Shouting before launching a surprise attack? Are you some kind of fool?" the assassin maid taunted with a cold look in her crimson eyes.

Only the spiral Shade Fiend remained, but it was on a whole other level compared to the other two.

I suppose I'll have to take this fight seriously…

Shary drew an ebon blade, the Death Butterfly's Dagger, Refisca. It was a legend-class magical weapon gifted to her by Leonis. Holding the beautifully decorated hilt in an underhand grip, Shary pushed off against the building's wall and leaped up.

The spiral demon took cover in the shadows, apparently waiting for a chance to strike. This assassin was probably from the Realm of Shadows, like Shary. The creature gave off the scent of one who'd spent their life in the dark and mastered killing as their craft.

Once, a girl named Shary Corvette had been no different.

This is all I can do.

As Shary jumped, the Refisca formed copies of itself in the air. The countless knives rained down on the girl's target, and yet, they didn't seem to hit anything. For a moment, there was only the sound of splashing water.

Suddenly, ghostly obsidian arms extended from the walls all around Shary, coiling around and snaring her limbs.

"…?!"

Giant spiders slithered out of the shadows on the walls, one after another. Three, four, six of them. All were identical to the demon that had attacked the dorm.

"Geh-eh… Geh-eh-eh-eh-eh…!" An eerie cackling filled the alleyway.

"…I see. So that's what this was all about," Shary whispered as she tried to get free.

These creatures were the same as the one that had attempted to kill Leonis and Sakuya through self-destruction. That could only mean…

"You create these demons with your power," Shary deduced.

"Precisely. I am Raspilius," the spiral Shade Fiend said, emerging above Shary.

"What you have observed is the power of my Demon Sword, granted to me by the great one. It enables me to forge reproductions of demons I've consumed. The Shade Fiends are a force of assassins, contained entirely within me."

"…Who is this great one you speak of?" Shary questioned.

"You don't need to know," the Shade Fiend replied with a sneer. "After all, you're going to die."

The next moment, the spider demons all exploded at once.

◆

Racing up the emergency staircase, Riselia and Arle hurried to the surface. After Riselia kicked the door open, the pair found themselves in a botanical garden. Plants from across the world were gathered here, seemingly for research purposes.

Turning to look at Arle, Riselia asked, "Who is that bishop?"

“I don’t know much about him, either.” The elf shook her head, her ponytail waving to and fro. “All I know is that he came *from the same era I did*.”

“The same…era?” Riselia’s brow furrowed at this unusual wording.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I have the time to explain.”

“…?!”

Countless fireballs formed in the air and flew down at the two. Riselia and Arle split up, dodging the burning spheres that skipped across the ground, leaving flames in their wake.

“Is this the sort of place you like to play?” mocked a familiar voice.

Crack, crack, crack…!

Fissures ran through the air as if it were made of glass, and from within them, Nefakess appeared, still cloaked in his bishop’s garb. Riselia recognized those fractures.

“Void cracks?! But how?!”

Nefakess raised his hand with a smile.

“Egila Iva!”

Bolts of black lightning lanced from his hand.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Arle Kirlesio deflected the electricity with her sword and lunged at Nefakess. Riselia could see a faint aura cover Arle’s body. The elf had reinforced her physical strength with mana.

Despite her dainty arms, Arle loosed an intense slash. Unfortunately, Nefakess sank back into a Void fissure before her blade could connect.

“Hmm. An Arc Seven. The Demon Smiting Sword, Crozax…,” Nefakess remarked, appearing behind the two girls.

“…?!”

Arle swiftly turned, preparing to cut the man through, but her slice was blocked by a staff that manifested in Nefakess’s hands.

“A pity. It seems you’ve yet to master it,” he taunted with a thin smile.

“That rod…,” Arle said, her eyes narrowing.

“The Staff of Downfall, Vraluka Zoa. A legendary archmage’s staff.”

“One of the Six Heroes…?!” Arle’s eyes widened in shock.

“As you can see, I’m wasted on close combat.”

Sensing the mana building up in the rod’s tip, Arle jumped backward.

“Third-order sorcery—Farga!”

A deafening explosion boomed. The air shook, and the blast consumed Arle.

“It seems your current strength is a far cry from your original power, elven hero…,” needled Nefakess.

“Don’t forget about me!” Riselia shouted, charging toward the man in priestly garb with her Bloody Sword in hand.

However, Nefakess avoided her handily. Moving his hand in the shape of the holy mark across his chest, he began chanting. “Bring forth sacred radiance on the haughty fallen dead—Holy Light Barrier!”

Nefakess struck his staff down on the ground, and a bright, divine glow began spreading around him.

“Kuh… Ahhhhhhhh!” Overcome with burning, sizzling pain, Riselia crumbled where she stood. “Wh-what…?!”

“This is holy magic. For an undead, there is nothing more painful.”

“Ngh… Ahhhhhhhhh!”

Riselia couldn’t breathe. Gripping her own neck, the young woman slumped to the ground, writhing in agony. The pain defied description. It was as if her very soul were being scorched to the core.

“How peculiar,” whispered Nefakess as he watched Riselia twist and thrash. “If this is the extent of your power, I can’t see how you managed to destroy the Holy Woman.”

“Ah… Nghahhhh… Ahhhhhh!”

“Ah well. There’s plenty of information I need to squeeze out of you…” Nefakess violently grabbed Riselia by her long, argent locks.

At that very moment, a flash coursed through the air.

Fwishhhhhhhhh!

“…What?!”

As a slash delivered at godspeed bore down on Nefakess, the man reflexively blocked it with his staff. Pale lightning sizzled and popped in the air, dancing vibrantly over the water puddles. At the center of it all stood…

“—Forgive me for taking so long, Miss Selia,” Sakuya apologized quietly, Raikirimaru in her hands. “I’m guessing I have permission to cut this man into ribbons?”

◆

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, obey your fated destruction—Arzam!”

Leonis’s Staff of Sealed Sins radiated an ominous glow. From above came a tenth-order spell that could not be matched in terms of single-target offensive power.

Booooooooooooooooom!

An earsplitting detonation, strong enough to shake the world itself, sounded as a pillar of red flames burst out of the ground, snaking upward.

However…

“…No damage whatsoever. I expected nothing less from you, Veira.” Leonis felt cold sweat drip down his forehead. A crimson dragon stood composedly before him. Against any other opponent, a tenth-order spell would have been a certain victory.

“Fighting a dragon with sorcery is a bad idea, after all.”

“Could we seal her in the Realm of Shadows?” Blackas asked.

Leonis considered the idea for a moment but ultimately shook his head. “That risks giving me another enemy to fight.”

Leonis’s third minion was sealed in the Realm of Shadows, and they were beyond his power to control at the moment.

“We’ll have to end this quickly. And I might have no choice but to turn it into a melee battle…”

Battles between Dark Lords could last days, even weeks. When Leonis had an undead body that knew no fatigue, he relished that challenge. However, now that he was a human child, he was subject to exhaustion. His mana was also only a third of what it had once been. Playing a slow game here would spell defeat.

“Graz Garud! Voira Zo! Al Gu Belzelga!”

Muttering incantations in quick succession, he waved his staff to increase the power of his sorcery and unleashed a flurry of tactical-level eighth-order spells.

“Grohhhhhhhhhhhhh!” the infernal dragon howled, raining bolts of destructive lightning within the barrier.

“…!”

Blackas jumped away, acrobatically launching off the barrier’s walls to evade the thunderbolts.

“W-wait, Blackas, my present body can’t keep up!” Leonis cried out.

The ebon wolf didn’t stop, however. Leonis grabbed onto him for dear life with his free hand. He had a Rider’s Unity spell in place to ensure he’d stay mounted on his friend, so there was no chance of him falling off, but…

“We’ll close in on her this way, Lord Magnus!”

“Understood!”

Blackas dashed and jumped, racing vertically up the barrier. Veira raised her head and let fly a jet of deadly fire.

“Sharianos!”

Instead of using defensive magic, Leonis reflexively cast an offensive ice element spell.

Booooom!

Cold met hot, and there was an intense blast of steam, filling the area with heavy mist. Yet even in the reduced visibility, Blackas did not stop.

“She doesn’t seem to be calling any more Voids…,” the great wolf observed.

“You’re right. She probably instinctively understands that those small fries will be of no use against me,” Leonis boasted.

Of course, the dragon-class Voids were only weak to someone of Leonis’s power. The hideous creatures were a considerable threat to Excalibur Academy’s students. Although Leonis had left the Three Champions of Rognas at the Hræsvelgr dorm, they couldn’t protect the entirety of the Seventh Assault Garden alone.

I have to settle this quickly.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

A destructive burst of flames surged against the barrier walls. This breath attack was capable of blowing away entire fortresses. Simple defensive spells couldn’t hope to deflect it. Blackas darted to avoid the scorching fire.

“Tsk. And I’d hoped that fighting close would be easier.” Just as Leonis muttered the words, Veira underwent a sudden change.

◆

“Sakuya?!” Riselia called out, still lying on the ground.

“Ultimate Blade Technique—Thundering Lightning Slash!” Sakuya unleashed a flurry of rapid swipes, her body surrounded by electricity.

Each stroke of her blade was so swift that Riselia couldn’t follow them, even with her vampire’s eyesight. Sakuya had likely cut down countless Voids on the way here. Raikirimaru’s power increased her speed and allowed her to accelerate further the more the weapon tasted the flesh of its enemies. By now, Sakuya was moving at her maximum speed.

This was Sakuya Sieglinde’s true, uninhibited might, a talent she’d never displayed during training matches.

However, something about her otherworldly sword prowess felt… curiously off to Riselia.

Sakuya?

Riselia ran mana through her eyes, and as she watched the clash between her friend and Nefakess, she saw what was bothering her. Sakuya’s right hand, the one clenching Raikirimaru, was enveloped in black vapor.

Is that the same miasma Voids give off? But that can’t be…

But then…

“By my…blade…thy contact…shall be null and void…!” Riselia heard a voice manage from behind her.

Arle Kirlesio approached, crawling along the ground.

“I shall shatter thy light… Phar Rias!”

At that moment, the luminous barrier torturing Riselia shattered.

“Spell breaking is…my…specialty…,” the elf girl uttered, gritting her teeth in pain all the while. “You can…still move, right…? That girl is strong…but she can’t win…on her own…”

As Arle lost her balance and collapsed, Riselia hurriedly went to catch her. A puddle of blood was forming at the elf’s feet, and it seemed she’d broken a few bones. Powerful fighter or not, she was in no condition to continue the battle.

Riselia was hardly in better condition. Her Vampire Queen abilities were already working to heal her, but it was consuming a lot of her mana.

If only I…had more…

Riselia tried to rise to her feet, her consciousness still muddled. That bishop may have looked human, but he was a monster of unfathomable strength. Sakuya couldn’t fight him off alone.

“…I’m sorry. I’ll only take a little.”

Riselia swallowed audibly before gingerly sinking her fangs into Arle’s neck.

◆

Vrah….Vrahhhhhhh!

Fetid miasma seeped from between Veira’s scales. Her massive form swelled with an ominous cracking sound. Plates were beginning to pop off of her as sharp, taloned arms sprouted from beneath. The Dragon Lord was taking on another, more despicable form.

“…Kh. Blackas, we have to bring her down before it’s too late!” Leonis growled. He wondered if it was already too late to save his fellow Dark Lord.

Should that be the case, then I will be the one to lay you to rest, he promised.

Leonis landed on the ground, facing Veira directly as a black miasma billowed from its body.

“Original sorcery—Black Tyrant!”

Dark flames enveloped Blackas and Leonis. The Demon Sword Dáinsleif contained the soul of a sword-wielding hero within its blade. Whenever Leonis held the weapon, he became capable of using the techniques he’d learned from the Swordmaster Shardark.

But right now, Leonis’s blade abilities were sealed with the sword. He could handle a weapon to some extent, but he couldn’t hope to match Sakuya without Dáinsleif’s power.

That was why he’d used Black Tyrant. The armor spell allowed him to take Blackas Shadow Prince’s power into his body. This granted Leonis

some melee combat prowess. It was magic that the Undead King had developed himself for when he fought enemies resistant to sorcery.

"Should I create a Shadow Blade?" Blackas asked his longtime friend.

"No. A weapon created with magic can't hope to pierce her scales."

Leonis returned his Staff of Sealed Sins to the shadows and took hold of something else.

"When facing Dark Lords, I use this."

Sssssss…

A steel longsword with a decorated cross-shaped pommel slipped out of the thick ebon. This was Zolgstar Mezekis—a Dark Lord–slaying weapon. During the incident aboard the *Hyperion*, the witch Sharnak had turned it into a monster.

Leonis had crushed that Void Lord to bits but gathered its fragments and had successfully reforged Zolgstar Mezekis with the aid of his magic. The original blade was lost, of course, but Leonis was a first-class magical craftsman. This sword was more than capable of penetrating the Dragon Lord's scales.

"Veira, I've always regretted…not fighting by your side to the very end," admitted Leonis as he took up his mighty blade.

As the Undead King, he'd wished to die honorably in battle, fighting the Six Heroes. Yet Roselia had given him another task, and he'd lived on, awakening in this new age.

"Feel my blade's wrath—Veira, the Dragon Lord!"

◆

"Farga!"

A torrent of flames rocketed through the air, sending Sakuya flying.

"Khn… Hyahhhhhhhhh!"

Yet rather than crash, she somehow managed to land on her feet and slash at her foe with Raikirimaru again. Nefakess gave a consternated look but managed to dodge.

"Oh. How strange. A human withstanding a third-order spell with naught for protection but their own flesh and blood. Or perhaps…there's more?"

"I've no reason to explain myself to you," Sakuya said, thrusting her sword at the man. Raikirimaru skimmed against Nefakess's throat.

"Dance forth, flames of scorching heat—Phranis!" This time, he cast a spell at point-blank range. Fire erupted from the tip of his staff, washing over Sakuya.

"That won't work," Sakuya declared, cleaving a path through the fire and taking a confident step forward.

"What…?!" Nefakess whispered in disbelief, his eyes wide.

A blue light settled over Raikirimaru's blade. "Demon Sword—Yamichidori," Sakuya stated in a soft tone. "It's the first time I've wielded it against a human opponent."

“Oh, this… Why, this is fascinating,” Nefakess remarked, cracking an indomitable smile. “I see. You’re not so much human as you are turning into a V—”

“Silence! Close your foolish mouth!”

There was a flash of azure as Raikirimaru swept forward. Sakuya then pulled the sword close to her and thrust with lightning-fast speed. The blade plunged in, ready to gouge its enemy’s heart out, yet it caught nothing but empty air. Nefakess had vanished into a floating crack.

“…What?!”

“There’s nothing to be surprised about,” Nefakess sneered from somewhere. “I’m closer to the nothingness than you are. That’s all there is to it…”

Sakuya reflexively hopped away, but—

“Dance, ye gelid blades of frost—Shariagira!”

“…Aaaaaaah!”

Frigid knives sped through the air, cutting into Sakuya’s body.

“We’re not finished. Shariagira—” Nefakess stepped out on one of the cracks in the air, chanting another spell.

“Nefakess!”

Zwoom!

Blood, sharpened to an edge, swung like a whip, biting into the man’s shoulder.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!” Turning around, Nefakess found Riselia, bringing her Bloody Sword down at him.

Slash!

The silvery blade severed the man’s right arm, the one that had been holding his staff.

“…Wh…at?!”

Converting all the blood in her body into mana, Riselia stepped forward. Her argent hair shone luminously, and the True Ancestor’s Dress she was now wearing let out a crimson glow.

Nefakess jumped back. His fair features were stained with panic. “…I’ll admit I’m surprised. I didn’t think you’d break free of my Holy Light Barrier.”

Riselia offered no answer, only glaring. I have to focus all my mana into this slash…!

That’s when the young woman noticed something strange. Even though she’d completely severed Nefakess’s arm, he wasn’t bleeding. Instead, a black mist was rising from the wound.

That’s Void miasma! But how?!

“Celestia! Celestia! Celestia!”

Bolts of purifying light leaped from Nefakess’s hand. The spells were capable of reducing most undead to dust. As they struck Riselia, a pain intense enough to sear her heart to ashes coursed through her chest. Still,

the girl pushed forward. So long as she wore the True Ancestor's Dress, holy magic could not strike her down.

"Holy Light Barri—" Nefakess prepared to chant another barrier spell.

"Don't forget about me!"

A flash of lightning streaked past Riselia.

"Ultimate Blade Technique—Lightning Flash!"

Raikirimaru tore into Nefakess's right shoulder before he could complete his magic. Not even a second later, Riselia's Blood Sword stabbed at the man's chest. Then countless blades of blood formed and trained on Nefakess, enclosing him in a crimson cage.

Riselia held up the Bloody Sword and chanted, "As queen of the undead, I order you! Dance, frolic with madness—Blood Storm!"

The red knives swirled and slashed, yet Nefakess did not seem frightened.

"Keh… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"…?!"

"I see! So I've underestimated humankind's power!"

Crack, crack, crack…!

Fissures began appearing at the base of his severed arm. The fracture glared at Riselia like some gigantic eye. It was so unnatural that the young woman shuddered and froze in place for a second.

"I shall retreat here, out of respect for humanity. However…" Nefakess paused to level a captivated, almost clinging sort of glare at Riselia. "Beauteous queen. Allow me to grant you this humble offering." A triangular stone flew from the man's hand.

"…!"

Riselia tried to evade it, but the object disappeared into her chest.

"May you prove to be a worthy vessel for the goddess."

"Wait…!" Riselia demanded, trying to grab Nefakess, but he slipped into a crack and disappeared.

"Miss Selia, who was that man?" Sakuya asked her.

"I don't know. He was, like, a Void in human form. But that can't be…" Riselia shook her head.

"No. I've seen something like this before," Sakuya admitted.

"Huh?"

"The Void Lord who destroyed the Sakura Orchid looked like a person."

◆

It really can produce an unlimited number of demons.

Shary sprinted through a rainy alley. While countless spider demons pursued her through the shadows, she lashed out at them with whips. But each time she destroyed a spider, an intense explosion knocked her back.

"…!"

Beaten down by repeated self-destruct blasts, fatigue began playing over Shary's features. Her maid uniform was drenched with rain, and her left hand, which had been gripping the Refisca, had been rendered almost wholly useless.

The injuries Shary had suffered earlier were more severe than she'd realized. She'd avoided fatal damage by cloaking herself in shadows, but…

Perhaps I've…grown weaker…, the maid thought in self-deprecation. My lord, you brought color to my world, and in exchange…

Looking around, Shary realized she was surrounded by darkness. The shadow corridors had been ruined. There was no escape. If the spiders continued to detonate, she wouldn't last long. Shary got to her feet, holding the Refisca between her teeth.

I have to at least defeat the Shade Fiend, even if it means going down with him.

But just then, something dropped down to the puddle at her feet…a ring. It was the one Leonis had given her as a reward. She'd held on to it ever since. Shary hurriedly picked it up. The trinket possessed magic capable of summoning a powerful monster.

…If I call a creature on par with a Shadow Demon, it should at least stall Raspilius.

Seeing Shary bending over as an opening, the spider demons lunged at her.

My lord!

◆

"Let's finish this, Veira!"

Leonis charged with Zolgstar Mezekis, the Evil-Rending Sword, in his hand. Blackas's dark flames burned around his body.

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The Dragon Lord breathed destructive white heat at Leonis.

Leonis planted his feet on the ground and leaped up with a shout. The black flames at his legs billowed, leaving a small crater in his wake. Veira's fire swept across the ground, blowing dirt and forming burning columns. Yet Leonis was already above the dragon, swinging down the Evil-Rending Sword as he chanted a spell.

"Al Gu Belzelga!"

Zolgstar Mezekis turned red with heat from Mage Blade, a Demon Sword technique that allowed one to channel sorcery through their weapon. Of course, there weren't many objects in existence that could withstand the might of an eighth-order spell. Anything but the Arc Seven would've likely shattered to pieces from the mere attempt.

The countless Void hands spurting out of the Dragon Lord's body grasped after Leonis.

"Too slow!" Leonis tumbled in midair, somersaulting as he slashed through the arms. This manner of attack wasn't part of the Hero Leonis's sword skills that were sealed with Dáinsleif. Wielding a weapon with sheer magical power was the style of a Dark Lord. No, even that wasn't a proper description. There was no form or grace to Leonis's movements.

Swinging a sword with the abandon of a child is exhilarating!

There was a ferocious smile on Leonis's lips.

Voooosh!

He cut down the Void arms and then aimed at Veira, thrusting the Evil-Rending Sword into the dragon's neck! The power of a Holy Sword forged for slaying Dark Lords pierced through the creature's hide.

I'd expect nothing less from one of the Arc Seven. Truly it is a weapon forged for slaying my comrades and me!

With the Black Tyrant's flames coursing around him, Leonis forced the edge of Zolgstar Mezekis farther into Veira's nape. The corrupted dragon howled, spreading her wings in an attempt to escape. Hoping to shake Leonis off, she bashed herself against the barrier's walls. As she climbed up toward the sky, Veira rammed herself again and again into the glowing surfaces that trapped her and her fellow Dark Lord.

The goddess's barrier couldn't possibly be destroyed, but each time Veira collided with it, the walls flickered.

I can't believe her sheer strength!

Leonis desperately clutched onto Zolgstar Mezekis, its blade still buried in Veira's flesh.

"Rah Vaias!"

A sixth-order spell passed through the weapon, entering directly into the dragon's body! More scales peeled off the massive creature, and a black miasma issued from her wounds.

"…?!"

Drawing out his blade, Leonis began to fall. But as he did, he slashed through the base of one of Veira's wings.

"Grohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Veira howled madly, diving downward to pursue Leonis as he plummeted. Faced with the sight of the dragon's open maw, Leonis chanted a spell from the Realm of Death.

"Heed my voice, for I am the king of the undead who transcends death! Rise forth and gather at my side, ye soldiers!"

The moment Leonis landed, a gigantic skeletal dragon appeared, biting down on Veira's throat! Using the remnants of gigantic sea creatures lying at the bottom of the ocean, Leonis had haphazardly pieced together a makeshift bone dragon. That was one reason he'd selected the seabed as their battlefield.

"This isn't over yet. Let's go!" Leonis shouted with a smirk as he pieced together one skeletal monster after another.

However, Veira crushed his creations with swings of her mighty tail.

Whoooooosh…!

While shielding himself with bone, Leonis put some distance between himself and Veira.

They couldn't even stall her…

Curiously, Leonis's opponent didn't give chase. The dragon began to swell again, and her remaining scales came off as more miasma began to spout from her body. With her neck at an unnatural angle, Void wings and arms bubbled out of her flesh. It was a sickening sight, as if the creature were continually repeating cycles of evolution and regression.

"This needs to end swiftly," Leonis muttered, gritting his teeth in frustration. "I can't bear to see this happen to you!"

Giving such a shameful display was an insult to proud Veira, the Dragon Lord!

"Arzam!" Endowing Zolgstar Mezekis with the strength of his most potent offensive spell, Leonis charged toward the Dragon Lord.

"Gyrahhhhhhhh!"

Leonis thrust the blade into the dragon's heart, piercing it through, but he continued shoving the weapon deeper.

"Burst—Arzam!"

Boom!

Veira's body ballooned, turning red like lava.

"Arzam!"

Again Leonis loosed another tenth-order spell into the dragon, hoping that it would somehow burn away the corruption within Veira.

Zolgstar Mezekis shattered to pieces within the great beast's body, and crimson flames came gushing out, turning to smoldering magma that spewed out of Veira.

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!

With a thundering noise, Veira, the Dragon Lord, fell to pieces.

"…"

Gripping Zolgstar Mezekis while funneling so much power through it had left Leonis's hands burned. He looked down at Veira's remains.

"That was a fair duel. Surely you won't hold a grudge."

Had the Dragon Lord been at full strength, Leonis likely wouldn't have been able to kill her. Then again, he wasn't in his original form, either. Sparing no time for sentimentality, Leonis drew the Staff of Sealed Sins from his shadow.

"Create Elder Undead."

He sprinkled blood over Veira's remains and chanted a spell from the Realm of Death. It was the same magic he'd used to resurrect Riselia as a Vampire Queen.

I hope you at least become an Elder Dracolich.

At worst, she would return as a mindless dragon zombie.

But if you do, I won't make you my minion. I'll grant you the peace of a proud death.

The spell circle gave off an ominous glow, and the spell took effect. However, something odd occurred. Leonis was suddenly surrounded by light, and he disappeared.

◆

Huh?

Shary's eyes opened slowly. What she saw defied her wildest imagination. The spider demons that lunged at her lay dead, pierced by blades of ice.

"Wh-what is this…?"

As her eyes adjusted, she made out a figure.

"My…lord…?"

Leonis stood with his back to her, the Staff of Sealed Sins in his hands.

"…My lord, what are you doing here?"

"That's what I want to know….," Leonis answered, looking perplexed. Upon seeing the ring he'd given the assassin maid, he nodded in realization. "You used the ring."

"The ring…?"

"I told you, didn't I? That item allows its owner to summon the greatest, most powerful thing in the Dark Lords' Armies." Leonis averted his gaze sheepishly. "In other words, me."

"…Oh."

"Tch. What is that supposed to mean?" Leonis asked indignantly.

Shary remained seated on the ground. "Heh… Heh-heh-heh… Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh…" She started chuckling softly, unable to hold back the laughter.

"…Is something amusing about this?"

"You're funny sometimes, my lord."

“…Something about your tone rubs me the wrong way, but very well.” Leonis shrugged. “So who are you fools supposed to be…?”

He finally turned his gaze in the direction of the Shade Fiends surrounding him and Shary. The creatures froze, sensing his overwhelming aura of death.

Hmm. More demon assassins.

“I am a merciful Dark Lord,” he told the swirling spiral demon in command of the others. “But since you had the gall to lay a hand on my personal maid, I am given no recourse but to sentence you to a gruesome death.”

“What nonsense are you spouti—?” the spiral demon began.

“Eighth-order spell—Nel Gira,” Leonis chanted. A black sphere appeared in midair. It consumed the demons, sending them into oblivion. In no time at all, Shary and Leonis were alone.

Turning to face Shary, Leonis said, “—Come, Shary. Let us return home.”

“Y-yes, my lord!”

The leaden gray clouds finally cleared away, and rays of sunshine shone down on the city.

EPILOGUE

“And that concludes my report of the recent incident.” The avatar of research, Officer Clauvia Phillet, stated. She’d delivered the account in the royal family’s private room within the Astral Garden.

Her audience was one Alexios Ray O’ltriese, the emperor’s younger brother, who was presently residing in Camelot.

“Hmm. So the dragon Dark Lord was polluted by the Voids, went berserk, and then sank into the ocean around the Seventh Assault Garden, where it perished. A result that goes way beyond anything I would have ever imagined…”

“Excalibur Academy’s administration bureau is investigating the seabed, but its remains have seemingly vanished,” explained Clauvia. Her avatar, a white cat, bowed its head respectfully to the floating, mirror-surfaced sphere.

“The cause behind the corruption is unclear, yes?” Alexios confirmed.

“That matter is being investigated. However…,” Clauvia trailed off.

“What is it?”

“Immediately before the seal came undone, the Dark Lord seemed to react to something.”

“Hmm. ‘Something’?”

“I don’t know for sure. However, Duke Crystalia’s daughter happened to be present.”

“A survivor of the catastrophe from six years ago. That is quite fascinating,” Alexios remarked pensively.

“Of course, I’m inclined to believe it’s merely a coincidence, but it does bother me ever so slightly…,” Clauvia admitted while her avatar nodded.

“Very well. I’ll keep that in mind. Regardless, we’ve suffered a great loss. Perhaps the Dark Lords who opposed the gods in ancient times are simply too much for us to handle.”

“If I may be so forward, Your Highness, we—”

“Yes, I know. We must continue our search for others of Veira’s kind. Even if they beckon destruction upon us, they’re the only hope we have left.”

◆

The arrival of a gigantic Void had cut the Holy Light Festival short. Excalibur Academy suspended classes for three days so that all could focus on repairing the destruction.

However, since the Sixth Assault Garden also suffered damage in the attack, the two massive islands remained coupled for much longer than

intended. The exhibits that students had made were reopened during the break period. All sales were donated to help with reconstruction.

For how great the disaster was, the people of the Assault Gardens recovered from them quickly. Perhaps that resilience came naturally to people who fought the Voids.

Regina had explained to Leonis that "The Holy Light Festival is significant because it represents igniting the luminance of human civilization after a long period of darkness. It's an important celebration, one they won't cancel that easily. As far as humanity is concerned, this is a matter of pride."

I see. Pride, is it? Yes, maybe that's part of where humankind's strength stems from.

"By the way, kid, I got a new maid's uniform, and—," Regina started.

"I am *not* dressing up in women's clothes again!" Leonis shook his head with indignation.

Veira's remains had conspicuously vanished from where she'd died. Perhaps she'd been too corrupted and disappeared as other Voids did. It seemed that Leonis's attempt to resurrect her as an undead had failed. While he thought that was an unfortunate development, there was nothing to be done about it. Truth be told, Leonis knew the odds of succeeding on that front hadn't been great to begin with.

Although the fight was over, one question still needled at Leonis's mind: Why had Veira awakened from her thousand-year slumber when she did? It couldn't have been a coincidence. Perhaps it was a reaction brought on by Leonis's, a fellow Dark Lord's, presence.

Either way, that man was undoubtedly involved.

Nefakess Reizaad, the Devil of the Underworld's former attendant. Amid the chaos, he'd confronted Riselia and Sakuya. Leonis had thought himself wary, but he hadn't anticipated that the man would get so directly embroiled. Leaving Shary alone as Riselia's guard had been a mistake that Leonis greatly regretted.

As it happened, Leonis had sealed the demon that attacked Shary in a Prison of Truth to draw information out of it. The spell's magic forced those captured within to talk. Already Leonis had learned that Nefakess had summoned the creature and had ordered it to capture Riselia. It didn't seem to know anything else, though. Nefakess was after Riselia, seemingly because he thought she was responsible for Tearis Resurrectia's destruction. He didn't realize that the one to foil his plans in the Third Assault Garden was, in fact, the Undead King.

He will pay dearly for laying a hand on my minion, Leonis swore as he lay on his bed.

"Ah, good morning, Leo," Riselia said as she entered the room. She was fresh out of the shower, it seemed, as her silvery locks were a bit damp.

"Have your injuries healed?" Leonis inquired.

"Yeah. A vampire's regenerative powers are really impressive."

Not a single scratch marred the young woman's smooth skin.

"Hmm, actually, Leo, I need to consult you about something," Riselia hesitantly mumbled as she sat on the bed.

"What's wrong? Do you want my blood?"

"Y-yeah—I mean, no! That's not what I meant!" Riselia's face flushed, and she shook her head. "A-actually, I drank blood from someone else… Just a little bit."

"…What?!"

During Riselia's battle with Nefakess, she'd required more blood to keep up with the True Ancestor's Dress's mana needs and had sucked Arle Kirlesio's blood.

"Leo, what am I going to do? I read that people bitten by vampires turn into vampires, too…"

Apparently, she learned as much from those books she'd gotten at the library when researching things for the haunted café. Riselia was anxious at the thought that Arle was an undead now because of her. Leonis, however, simply looked slightly disgruntled.

"Yes, it should turn her into an undead. If she's fortunate, she'll rise as a vampire, but most people become ghouls. Your turning into a Vampire Queen was a stroke of luck."

"Wh-what are we going to do?!" Riselia squeaked, honestly panicked.

"I'm joking," Leonis told her with a shrug.

Sucking on someone's blood wasn't enough to turn them into a vampire's minion. However, Leonis did feel curiously upset that Riselia had partaken of another's blood.

Could it be that I want her all for myself? No, that's not quite it…

Still unsure of what to make of this odd feeling, Leonis coughed dryly. "J-just don't suck blood from anyone other than me, please."

"A-all right. I won't," agreed Riselia.

"Here you go, then." Leonis held out his hand to her.

"Y-yeah. Thanks—and sorry…," Riselia said sheepishly. Whatever shame or embarrassment she felt quickly evaporated, and the young woman began licking Leonis's finger wantonly. "Schlrp… Mha… Nha… ♪ "

The thrust of Riselia's fangs brought on a sweet, rapturous twinge of pain that somehow felt oddly pleasant to Leonis.

"…Mmmhaa."

As wet noises filled the room, Shary puffed up her cheeks grumpily. She'd come over so she could have Leonis try some of her cookies, but now she couldn't bring herself to enter the room.

"I suppose I'll have to come again later."

Sighing, she turned around to leave.

And they turned out nice, this time. My lord can be such a dense idiot…

Still pouting, Shary took a bite out of one of the freshly baked sweets.

Mmm, it's good. ♪

The maid's eyes positively sparkled. Cookies from the store were tasty, but homemade ones were better.

Crunch. Chew, chew... Crunch, chew, chew...

And before she knew it…

"…Ah! I ate my lord's share, too!" Shary exclaimed, tearing up.

Booooooooooooom!

Suddenly, a rumbling thud shook the dormitory.

◆

"…Wh-what?!"

"…What was that?"

Riselia and Leonis hurriedly opened the window from their second-floor room and peered outside. A massive crater had formed in the forest behind the dorm.

"Is it…a meteor?" Leonis asked in disbelief.

"…It could be the Voids!" Riselia stated sharply.

Yet as the cloud of dust hanging in the air cleared away…it became apparent that it wasn't Voids or a meteor. A girl was standing in the center of the crater. She had flame-like crimson hair that billowed in the wind. There was something indescribably vivid and violent about her, and the beauty she exuded seemed otherworldly. Perhaps most unusual of all, two small horns were sprouting from her forehead. The young woman softly levitated into the air…and spotted the two staring dumbfounded from a window.

"Hey, where's *Leo*? He's here, isn't he?" asked Veira, the Dragon Lord.

AFTERWORD

Sorry for the wait on this volume, everyone! This is Yu Shimizu.

The members of the eighteenth platoon prepare for the school festival, our resident assassin maid endeavors to make sweets, one doubtful elven hero ends up being recruited into a terrorist group… And most importantly, a particular object is brought to the Sixth Assault Garden! I hope you find out where all those threads lead and enjoy the story!

Now, for some thanks.

To Asagi Tosaka, for drawing a lovely cover and insert illustrations for this book. Thank you so much! The haunted café's outfits were simply divine.

I'd also like to express my gratitude to Asuka Keigen, for drawing the manga adaptation in *Monthly Shounen Ace*. Congratulations on the release of the first volume! Both the cool battles and the slightly pervy scenes were so high quality. If anyone's interested, I suggest you pick it up!

As I mentioned in Volume 3, we produced a voice drama (yay!). Mutsumi Tamura voiced Leonis, Nao Toyama voiced Riselia, and Saori Onishi voiced Regina! We had quite the incredible cast come together for this. I hope you all enjoy it.

I'll see you again in the next volume!

—Yu Shimizu, April 2020

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